

The essential resource for all writers!

# THE BESTSELLER EXPERIMENT



## WRITERS' VAULT OF GOLD

Featuring writing advice from Joanne Harris,  
Bryan Cranston, Michael Connelly and many more!

# Welcome, brave writer...

You've heard the podcasts, you've signed up to the mailing list, you've defeated the three-headed dragon at the gates of development hell (entirely optional... most people skip that part) and now you have access to the exclusive **Writers' Vault of Gold**, the written repository of the best gems of wisdom from our wonderful guests on the Bestseller Experiment podcast.

This book is our gift to you, a magic sword on your hero's journey, as you too slay your demons of procrastination and goblins of, er, writer's block\*

Whatever. It's a free book full of writing tips from industry experts. Free!

And it will continue to update and expand throughout the fifty-two weeks of the Bestseller Experiment challenge. Look out for future weekly summaries by email. You can download the latest version of the eBook at any time — completely free! — using the link on the **Writers' Vault of Gold** email when you first subscribed. And if you've found this book useful and would like to contribute to the running of the podcast and this project, please visit our page at [patreon.com/bestsellerexperiment](https://patreon.com/bestsellerexperiment)

As supporters, we'll include your name in a special acknowledgments section at the back of this book.

So enjoy these top tips, take what you need from the vault to enrich your story and join us in the Bestseller Experiment Challenge to tell the world your story.

\*This metaphor is rapidly running out of steam.

# About the Marks

London-based author and screenwriter Mark Stay co-wrote the screenplay for Robot Overlords which became a movie with Sir Ben Kingsley and Gillian Anderson, and premiered at the 58th London Film Festival. Having worked in bookselling and publishing for over twenty years, Mark is an author-on-the-inside and has seen the triumphs and harsh realities of the publishing industry.

On the other side of the pond in Vancouver, fellow-Brit, bestselling recording artist and wannabe author Mark Desvaux has started twenty books and never finished one. As an eternal optimist and someone who coaches people to follow their dreams, Mark D is fascinated by the parallels between the music and publishing industries. Signed to Warner, with critically-acclaimed albums (Urban Myth Club) and appearances at festivals such as Glastonbury, he wonders if it is possible to translate his success as a recording artist into the book world.



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# Join the Bestseller Experiment Challenge!

Even if our attempt to write a bestseller turns about to be a complete disaster, we're positive that at least one of you out there has the skills to pull this off. Maybe you've got a draft of a novel that's sitting in a drawer that would benefit from the wisdom of our guests? Or maybe, like us, you're starting from scratch and relish the challenge? Whoever you are, we want you to top the charts and we'd love to hear your story as you join us on this insane adventure.

We're online:

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And if you've enjoyed the podcast do please give us a rating and review on iTunes, these really help us keep the challenge going: <http://bestsellerexperiment.com/itunes>

And visit it us at <http://bestsellerexperiment.com> to ask questions and get the latest news.

Thank you so much for joining us and keep writing!

Marks Stay & Desvaux

# Episode 1: Vics Tranter - Know Your Reader

*Vics Tranter has been working at the Orion Publishing Group in the UK for three years and in that time she has been leading the drive to ensure that the voice of the consumer is heard in the publishing process. She conducts surveys, focus groups and looks at consumer and industry data to integrate these insights to all areas of the business from editorial to marketing to sales.*

*We were both terrified and inspired by Vics' research. We started by asking her a simple question...*

## Who buys books?

Four in five people will have bought a book in the last year, which is absolutely huge, they might only be buying one book, or they might be buying lots of books, but four in five *have* bought a book... Crime and thriller comes out as the genre that people are reading most. About a third say they've read a crime and thriller book in the last year.



## Titles: keep it simple:

When you're looking at titles it helps to have one that's easy to remember. It sounds really simple, but if you want your average Joe consumer to tell their friends about it — which is one of the key ways that people find out about books — you need to be able to remember that title, so *Gone Girl*, *The Girl On The Train*, they're all quite simple, easy to remember titles.

## Pioneers and passionate readers:

One of the ways to gain momentum for an author is to start at the core: think of who those key influencers are, those uber passionate people, the book pioneers, the people who are looking for information before you even know what the information is. They're looking for new books, they're following and talking about their favourite authors on social media, they're writing blogs about books, and those influencers are absolutely key because those are the people that are then going to talk to the passionate readers - who haven't got time to *discover* the books — but they want a trusted source to get information on the next book to read to add to their list. I think one of the biggest issues as publishers that we have to overcome is how people discover books and still the main way that people find out about books is word of mouth.

***“The passionate readers tend to be women aged 35-45.”***

## People who only read one book a year:

A book is a big investment for a lot of people, so they want to know that it's going to be a page-turner... that they can take on holiday with them, and it's those passionate readers that are going to recommend that one book, so you need your book to be that one book that everybody talks about.

## On twists and suspense:

If you want to get that word of mouth recommendation, having a twist is a brilliant sell. You don't have to tell your friends about it, but you have to say "Ah, there's something in that book that you'll just love" and it almost doesn't matter what genre it is.

## How to understand your readers:

Talk to them. About issues, what they like to read, getting a real understanding how reading fits into their life would probably give you a good indication of the things they would like to read about.

Bloggers and key influencers are so important in all of this. Talk to them as well, look online, look at what they talk about could be really valuable as well.

In publishing we get so caught up in how well it's written, but actually the average consumer just wants to whip through it and they want enjoyment, suspense and they want to talk about it afterwards... Don't dumb it down or make it too basic, but make it accessible.

## VICS' TOP TIP

*The key is knowing the consumer. Getting the right product to them... Knowing who you're writing that book for. Having them in mind the whole way through. So that when you come to publish it, you know what the pitch is, you know who you're aiming it at and you can do that really easy sell, because you've had that customer in your mind while writing the book.*

# Episode 2: Juliet Ewers & Sam Eades - Don't Cheat The Reader

*Juliet Ewers and Sam Eades are commissioning editors at the Orion Publishing Group in the UK. Juliet started her career 26 years ago and has worked with key authors such as Maeve Binchy and Ian Rankin.*

*Sam is a publicist-turned senior commissioning editor and has worked with Neil Gaiman, Jessie Burton and Michael Connelly.*

*This episode was pure gold with both Juliet and Sam bestowing so many nuggets of wisdom that we seriously ran over our usual running time.*

*We started with a simple question...*

## What does a commissioning editor do...?

Sam: We need to know who the audience is for a book, where it sits in the market, and what are the key selling points... things go wrong if you don't know what those key selling points are.

You think you read books now, just wait till you become an editor... I've just had my three-hundreth submission.

But when there's heat around a new book they have to pitch themselves to agents:

Sam: I once dismembered a doll and put it in a box and presented it to the agent to get a book. You have to do these crazy things to get these books. But hopefully you win and you get to take on that author and that's when the fun begins...

The fun (or what does an editor do...?)

Sam: You send (the author) a set of editorial notes. Some of my notes have been two pages long, one of them was a thirty-five page document, and that's a mix of line edits — picking up grammar mistakes, repetition of words — or it might be structural edits, so moving things around cutting chapters that don't work, starting a book in a different place. That process is a conversation, the author might not agree with your changes, and you get to a point in the middle, and then you get the book. Alongside the editorial notes you're briefing the cover, you're writing the cover copy, we're writing the bibliographic data for retailers, and our job as commissioning editor is to manage the process from manuscript to finished book and beyond... and there's lots of Tweeting, too.

***Sam: "There are two types of editors: plot & story, and voice. And I'm not voice, I'm definitely more plot and story. What I'm looking for is a message, a theme, a story that will resonate with lots of people."***

## Juliet on what's changed the most in her career as an editor:

The biggest change is the social media side - it just didn't exist when I started - but then when I started at Orion we didn't even have email. If you were lucky, your author had a fax machine! But basically the process is the same, you're trying to find really good authors, talented people who you can help grow and develop their careers, whether you come up with an idea and find an author you think would be good for it, whether you're getting submissions from agents and then following through from initial pitch to publication and beyond.

Ideally, a commissioning editor needs to be building careers, you need to be working hand-in-hand with an author and have a gorgeously long, profitable career for both of you. The author needs to be happy, so you've got to have a good relationship with them, and that has never changed. The agents need to be happy as well, because they're not going to send you projects if they think you're no good. The way we do things has changed, but the essence of it is pretty much the same: you're trying to get the best books possible to the market.

## On the most common mistakes made by writers:

Sam: They write a book by numbers, they look at what's popular... a cynical attempt to write a bestseller where you see plot points in the story, but there's no overarching narrative, there's nothing that hangs it together... I think bestsellers work because they have something important they want to tell us, a bigger story. (The agent) Johnny Geller calls it the meaning in the space between words. The bad books don't have any meaning in that space.

Juliet: Copying somebody else is never going to work. If you don't love what you're writing, how can you expect anyone else to love it? When Bridget Jones was new we had so many wannabe Bridget Jones and it was "Oh, that works, I'll write that."

In historical fiction; they've done lots of research and they're jolly well going to put it in the book, regardless of whether it serves the story. That is so common and so annoying.

The biggest mistake authors make is thinking it's easy. It really isn't, so you have to be want to do it, you have to be dedicated, you have to love the genre you're writing in, because it will show if you don't.

***A warning from Juliet: "If you're cynically thinking "I'm going for a bestseller", it's really rare that you'll actually make it, because people will see right through it."***

## Learn from the best:

In crime writing, you can't go wrong if you read Ian Rankin, read Stephen King's "On Writing". Learn from people who are doing it well, but don't copy them and do your own thing.

## It needs a great "What if?"

Juliet: If you've got something at the beginning that makes people start thinking and then want to spend time with your book, that's going to help enormously, and an opening page that grabs them. If you lose them on the opening page, that's it, you're done.

## Believable characters:

Juliet: They don't have to be nice characters, but you have to believe in them and want to know what happens, why they're doing this and whether they're good or bad.

## Don't cheat your reader:

Juliet: It's fine to have a coincidence at the beginning, or to set things up, don't use a coincidence to solve it. Because if you cheat your read, yes they may have read the whole book, but they're not going to come back for another one. which you may not care about if you're only planning to write one, but generally authors want to have careers, and if you cheat your reader they will not forgive you. And write what you want to read. I think that's really important, because if you want to read it the chances are somebody else will.

***Juliet: "If you're having fun, that will show in the writing. Go with it. Enjoy it. Live it. Love it."***

## On twists:

Sam: It's fine to have a twist on the last page, as long as it impacts someone other than the reader. So another character has to realise something's happened, something different. Because otherwise readers feel really cheated.



## Ideas:

Sam: Look at popular films and think what's the dark version of this story? Or if it's a dark story, ask what's the warm version of this story?

## Don't write for Hollywood (yet):

Juliet: If you're writing with the intention of (your book) being made into a film, you're in danger. Do one or the other: write a film or write a book, otherwise it's like you've got an eye on something else and you won't pour everything into the actual project you're working on.

## This episode's top writing tips:

***Juliet: "Believe what you're doing."***

***Sam: "Read 'Into The Woods' by John Yorke."***

# Episode 3: Shannon Mayer - The Work Ethic & Your Muse

*Shannon started her working life as a farrier, but she had always longed to be a writer. For twelve years now she has been building a career as an incredibly successful indie author. She's a USA Today bestselling author, and she's written between 25-40 books (even she can't recall exactly how many!), which have sold over one and a half millions copies, and she's recently signed a deal with Amazon Publishing. You can find her online at [ShannonMayer.com](http://ShannonMayer.com) or @TheShannonMayer*

## Earning a living:

I was told by very well-meaning people — my family and friends — that you can't make a living from writing books, it's something you did as a hobby. The only people who made money were Stephen King or Anne Rice, the big names. And so I never took it seriously, until I was a few years into my horse-shoeing and my husband and I were discussing families and having children and how very difficult it would be to nine months pregnant and trying to crawl underneath a horse and change horseshoes. So we discussed options for another form of income. Being a typical family we couldn't survive on a single income, so he really encouraged me, he said you've always loved writing, so why not try? The worst thing that's going to happen is you don't make any money out of it, but the possibility is there that you could have a small source of income that could cover what you're already making. That was a few years ago — I was twenty-five — and I started then to write with the thought that I'm going to try and get something published and get my toes into that

industry... A lot of authors don't ever take that step. It's too fearful to put yourself out there without someone you really trust backing you.

## Agents:

I spent a lot of time in the traditional (publishing) world trying to get agents. I've had a couple of agents, and I've fired them both for various reasons. And I've had lots of interest *recently* from the traditional world, but it's because they've seen my success and so I can be a little pickier now. I spent a lot of time learning about the industry and about agents and publishing houses and editors and the process and writing pitches and queries and that sort of thing, and it was all a really great education. Long story short, it's been about three and half years now that I've been writing full-time and it's been a fantastic journey. It's hard, and definitely has its ups and downs, but I wouldn't trade it for anything.

## Making the most of quiet time:

When I had a little hour here and there to myself I was always writing down ideas. Like a lot of authors and writers out there I had probably ten or fifteen books that I'd started — two or three chapters of each — just running off inspiration I'd had in that moment, but I'd never gone forward with it and completed any of them. I think the most I'd have done was maybe thirty-five, forty thousand words of a single book, then another idea would crop up and because I didn't have a goal specifically to publish. An idea would catch my attention and I would wander off to that and I think that's a common issue with writers is that we have all these creative juices flowing, then as we get into a story a new idea crops up then we wander off. And that's a good thing and a bad thing.

## Training:

In terms of my own training I started attending writers' conferences where I could learn from the masters — authors who already published and successful — and taking various courses, including university-grade editing courses, that ran over six-to-eight weeks, so I learned the back end of things, too. Understanding why people edit the way they edit actually helped me become a stronger writer because I could avoid the mistakes that a lot of writers make that the editors then have to fix. I looked for anything I could do to improve my craft and improve my understanding of the industry and improve my ability to market down the line, even though I didn't have anything to market yet.

## Write what you love:

I write in the urban fantasy genre, which I love. It's a niche market, but that love comes through what I'm putting on paper, and I hear that back time and time and time again. And if I have a series that has twenty books in it (my readers) follow through the entire series.

## Don't try and write to market:

When Fifty Shades of Grey came out it was phenomenal worldwide hit for a variety of reasons and very quickly the books that followed that were exactly the same, and for a while they did okay, but now those authors have no following because they wrote to a market that had a limited run to it.

## Develop a work ethic:

This is not just a hobby. My experience has been that a lot people say writing's a hobby, something you do when you have time, or when you're bored! When I was shoeing horses I would take my laptop with me and when I had a break between clients I would pull over to the side of the road and work for twenty minutes and then drive to my next stop and my lunch breaks I'd just wolf down my lunch and I would take my remaining forty minutes and I would write. I would get up at five o'clock in the morning, knowing I had to leave by seven and I would write. I took every opportunity I had to create a writing habit, to the point where now if I don't write on a daily basis, I stress that I haven't got my word count in or I haven't worked enough to deserve success. It's a very strange thing how that swings from something being driven that all of a sudden now it's driving you. That work ethic is something that's hard to develop and is a hard thing to explain to a lot of authors, because it's such a creative job there is this feeling that I can't write unless my creative juices are flowing, I can't write unless my muse is speaking to me. And the reality is...

## Your muse is your bitch!

... not the other way round. And you have to train it to show up to the party and the only way to do that is to sit down and regularly encourage it to come forward I still do have moments of burnout, and I might take a few days off, but that work ethic, that drive and pushing your creativity forward is the only way to make it happen.

***If you wait for your creativity to show up you're gonna be waiting a long time.***

## Don't get sidetracked:

It's easy to get sidetracked by Facebook and these sorts of things, especially when you're published because you're doing all the marketing and you're saying to yourself this is part of the business and I have to do this too, which is accurate but turning that stuff off (is important).

I usually have some sort of classical or orchestral music in the background — because something with words is too distracting — and I can settle in within ten or fifteen minutes. Obviously some days are easier than others, but I still sit down.

## Learn to touch type:

It definitely helps with the output. Keep at it. When I started I was lucky to get three or four hundred words an hour. I was very slow. Over time I've gotten better at it.

## Like A Bump On A Log:

I always tell people, you can start now and work towards a goal and in a year you'll be halfway there, but if you don't do anything now, then a year from now that time still passes regardless of what you do with it, so you can either move forward or sit like a bump on a log. As long as you're continually moving forward, you're going in the right direction.

## Outlining:

I used to be a 'pantser' (writing by the seat of your pants). I didn't like the idea of being a plotter. I don't know what my hang-up was about it, but I learned very quickly if I was going to write at the capacity that I wanted to, and produce as much as I wanted to, then I was going to have to learn to plot. I took a hold of 'The Writer's Journey' by Christopher Vogler and now I write my plots out as detailed as I can and then send them to my editor, she has a look at them and pulls out any spots that she sees in terms of holes, or questions she would have or want answered, and then I make adjustments and then I dive in to the writing. That said, in the middle of books I will find myself veering off as a character misbehaves or whatnot.

## Editors:

At this point in my career it's pretty common for editors to come back with one or two points, usually just questions, wanting me to clarify that I understand as the author where I'm going with this. And they're trusting me to do that. Maybe once a year now the editor will come back and say this is not up to snuff and maybe you should revisit this before you start writing. The nice thing about doing it that way is it cuts down the time in terms of editing and revisions and it cuts down their work because, hopefully, I've covered some of the issues that they would otherwise be picking up in their first and second passes. If you give them a plot outline that's maybe three or four pages long, then it takes them twenty minutes to read through and take notes, or you're giving them a book that's seventy-five thousand words long, and it takes them a few days to read through... So you're saving yourself time and money by giving them that (outline).

It's probably been one of the best things I could have done, and I know it wouldn't work for every author, but anytime I've been insecure about my writing I've leaned on my editors to help me find the holes in it. That's their job, and I expect them to tell me when I'm writing crap.

There's definitely ego involved when it comes to your own writing. You always want the editor to hear that this is the most amazing book I've ever written, it's gonna get every prize out there, but the reality is they do you no favours by being kind. Kindness won't make me a better writer, it won't help you write a better book, it won't help you get a better chance of a publishing deal if they are kind. You need them to be brutal and the only they're going to do that is if you assure them that you'll come back to them, and you will pay their fee... after you stop crying in the corner.

## How to get an editor:

I met my very first editor on an editing course, she was training to be an editor, and I could tell that her style would match with what I was doing, so she worked with me for a few years. In the beginning you don't know where to look, especially in my case I didn't have a lot of author friends who were published, I didn't have the network to go to that I have now. There's a great site called [Predators and Editors](#) where you can look them up and see if an editor has been recommended. The other thing is to start creating that network of authors online and in conferences, these are great places to meet agents, editors and other authors and that's going to be your support network.

## Most People Choose To Eat:

The biggest hangup for most authors and writers is going to be that they have to put money out far in advance of ever seeing money come back, and that's a hard thing for people to swallow. We're all on a budget, we have to decide are we going to eat this month or are we going to pay our editor? And most people choose to eat, and that's not a bad thing, but you see authors who have



talent, they're great writers, they have great storylines, they have terrible editing and terrible cover art and so they never break out, because they don't have the help they need and they think that they're going to make money without some sort of industry help to polish their gem. You don't get a second chance at a first impression. Agents and editors of big publishing houses are watching bestseller lists, they're looking for their next author, so think about when you're looking for editors and cover art. You are going to make an impression one way or the other, and it could be good or it could be bad.

***You can't skim on your editors and your cover art, it's a very bad idea.***

## Shannon's Top Tip:

***Create that habit. The best thing you can do as a writer is create the habit to write every day.***

***You cannot improve your work, you cannot have a shot at improving your work if you're not working at it, so keep at it every day, even if you only give yourself half an hour, write. Write everyday.***

# Episode 4: Joanne Harris -

## Chocolat & Sheds

*Joanne Harris MBE is probably best known for her third novel Chocolat, which has sold well over a million copies and was made into a movie starring Johnny Depp and Juliette Binoche and was nominated for five Oscars. She's written over twenty books, including Runemarks and Gospel of Loki, which were based on Norse legend. Her books have been published in over fifty countries. We were delighted to speak to her at GollanczFest at Foyles' Bookshop in Charing Cross Road, London.*

### On starting out as a writer:

I'd always written, but I'd been convinced by various people that writing wasn't a proper job and you couldn't make a living doing it, and so a lot of my writing was done by stealth and nobody knew much about it.

I realised that not all the stories that I wanted to read had been written, or some of them had been written incorrectly, and so I thought, yeah, I'll do this, I'll re-write them, I'll change stuff, and invent my own things.

## On her first book, *The Evil Seed*:

It was a vampire novel, it was written mostly to annoy my mother who disapproved of horror immensely and who wouldn't allow it in the house.

There was no budget, no promotion of any sort, I was still teaching full-time. It was unadulterated joy for me, I didn't do a single signing, I didn't do anything like that, but just the fact that it was there on the shelves... I used to go to the one bookshop in my town where the book was on sale, there was one copy, and I would hang around to see if it had been sold and I'd move it around, put it on shelves so you could see the rather bad cover, and the bookshop owner kept staring at me. I assumed it was because he recognised me, but actually he thought I was stealing books.

## On finding her voice:

I hadn't really found my voice until my third book, and *The Evil Seed* was a sort-of gothic horror pastiche, with vampires, and the second one, *Sleep, Pale Sister*, was a sort-of Wilkie Collins rip-off with, I think, *five* first-person narrator voices. It was good practice in many ways, but it wasn't really my voice. I was still trying different voices out, which I think is a good thing for a young author to do, young authors don't always have a voice of their own and writing fan-fic and writing pastiches of other things is sometimes a very good way of doing that. It (*Sleep, Pale Sister*) was a better novel than *The Evil Seed*, and it was very ambitious in scope, it was a ghost story set in the world of Pre-Raphaelite art, but it wasn't quite me.

## On *Chocolat*, change, and dealing with success:

I was told that (*Chocolat*) wasn't going to sell, that it was too parochial, too weird, that it wouldn't fit into any conceivable category, and it was about things that are out of fashion. It was pretty much the moment that the industry washed its hand of me. I had tried lots of different things, and nothing had quite taken, and this weird little book appeared and no one wanted to publish it for ages. When it eventually *did* get published, as a sort-of afterthought, nobody really expected it to do that well.

I knew it was different. It wasn't quite as different to me as it might have been to readers that had followed me, because I had tried a number of other things, which were later published and rewritten, but I realised I had reached a pivotal moment where I had stopped writing coming-of-age novels disguised as horror stories or fantasy, and I had started to write about other things that were important to me: being a parent, where I had come from, my family and where they had come from. And so I think I had stopped looking inwards as much as I'd started looking outwards.

**Before *Chocolat*, I'd had one fan letter from a woman in Pinner who had signed it from herself and all her cats, and that was, as far as I know, the only reader I had.**

I had what they called a cult following, which meant I was largely unread, and all of a sudden, with *Chocolat*, I was expected to do signings, a tour, and there was a promotion budget, and I realised that I couldn't teach full-time anymore. So I took some time off to see what happened, and I have ever gone back.

I wasn't remotely prepared for any part of it. I wasn't prepared for the amount of free time I would suddenly have on my hands, which I spent mostly watching Doctor Who and making toast, I wasn't prepared for the amount of scrutiny that I was going to get from the press, I was completely incapable of dealing with that. Then the movie came out, just over a year after the book, and it was

completely crazy, because I was having to deal with it all over again on a much bigger scale. It was wonderful, but it was also high anxiety.

**Nobody ever trains you for success, because most of the time they try and prepare you for failure.**

Nobody believes this will happen on that scale, that quickly, and so I was prepared to fail, that was fine, I was good at that. Being successful, I *wasn't* so good at. I had a year of having awful panic attacks in very public places like St James's Palace and the Oscars, where I would just flake out like Tony Soprano, and wake up on the floor thinking 'How the hell did I get here?'

I got over it in the end.

## What advice would Joanne give to her younger self?

I'm not sure she would have listened. Which is a good thing. I wasn't thinking about being published, I was just enjoying it, and I think the thing you have to do initially is not to write so that you can be a writer, but just write because you love writing. If you don't love it, no one else is going to love it anyway, and the nebulous possibility of you ever being able to give up your day job and do it as a living is such an uncertain thing, and based on so many coincidences and combinations of luck, and being in the right place at the right time, that you can't be certain of that. So, whatever you do, if you don't enjoy the journey there is really not much point in doing it.

## On the reaction to *Runemarks*, a very different book to *Chocolat*:

I've had the same reaction with all of my new books — and now it's sixteen/seventeen books down the line — and I still get it every time, there's always somebody who goes, "Well, this is a departure!"

I've been doing different things all the time. The things that I do are linked, thematically, and there are certain things that, in my view, make them not a million miles away from each other, but people who think very narrow, genre-based things about books tend to find it difficult when they find I've written thrillers and fantasy books. Basically, what I say is live with it. This is what I've done. This is what I will always do. I've never promised that I would stay in one place. In fact, I've pretty much promised that I wouldn't, from the start, which is why it took me such a long time to get any sort of scrutiny, because if I had continued writing vampire novels, as they wanted me to, I would have been put in the vampire novel box, I would have been touted as the next Anne Rice, because everyone who wrote vampire novels was at the time, and I would have been thoroughly bored. I've always written what I wanted, and I've always been very lucky, because I have a very loyal readership who are content to follow me into these different places without complaining too much and without saying, "Why doesn't this one have chocolate in it?"

## Does she write every day?

I usually write every day, but it depends. Some days I know it's just not going to work, and I just stopped trying on those days because usually it's better if I do something else. If I get blocked, or if I am tired, or if I know I'm not going to perform, it's much better me doing something different.

## On her shed, and telling short stories on Twitter:

It started off as a kind of zen exercise, where I had to concentrate on writing one sentence, and then once I had written the first sentence, which happened to be on Twitter, then I would go off onto whatever I was doing. It has become something slightly different now; I write stories on Twitter, and you can watch me write them — I haven't written them beforehand — and it's helped me a lot in terms of economy of words, and of how sentences are constructed and has made me think about things in a way that wouldn't have done if I didn't have a hundred and forty character limit. It's been very helpful and it's actually affected my writing style outside of social media.

***My shed has more fans than I do on social media.***

## Common mistakes by new writers:

I'm concerned when I see young writers worrying too much about marketing themselves, or trying to analyse the market, or trying to write trends. I think those things are more or less irrelevant to a writer, and are probably doomed to disappointment, because as soon as you've isolated a trend it's will have gone by the time you've written a book that fits it, even if that were the kind of book you were supposed to write.

I hear a lot of people saying that they don't have time to read, and yet expect to write. I think this is completely counter-intuitive; I think you have to read so that you can write. And in a lot of different genres. I see a lot of younger writers who only really read within their genre, which means that they tend to miss out on the opportunity for flexibility and to explore other kinds of narrative. You don't know what you're going to get from what you read until you've read it, and if everything you read is within your comfort zone you're not going to be able to push that comfort zone as a writer.

My comfort zone is fiction, and I have to push myself to read outside of fiction, and whenever I do I am surprised at how rich it is, and how many ideas I get, and how much those ideas then inform what I'm writing.

## Joanne Harris's top tip for aspiring writers:

***Ditch the word "aspiring". It's bullshit. Just write. Don't worry too much about being a writer, or the quality of what you write, just do the best you can and be honest, and forget about the idea that writers are special people. If you write, then you are a writer.***



# Episode 5: NaNoWriMo Special

## With Grant Faulkner

*Grant Faulkner is the Executive Director of National Novel Writing Month - aka NaNoWriMo, co-founder of the lit journal 100 Word Story, co-founder of the Flash Fiction Collective, and a member of the Oakland Book Festival's Literary Council. His collection of one hundred 100-word stories Fissures, was recently published and he's just finished a novel, The Letters, and a collection of short stories, The Comfort Sin Provides.*

*We were very lucky to get to speak to Grant in the hectic run-up to NaNoWriMo, the annual event where writers pledge to write a 50,000-word novel in the month of November...*

### In the days leading up to NanoWriMo:

The Twittersphere is full of [#nanowrimo](#), with people discussing their ways to get ready, or if they're going to do it, or if they're on the fence, and it's just so exciting to see the whole world talk about novel writing. [#nanowrimo](#) trends on Twitter almost every day of the month in November. There's a lot of excitement out there, there's going to be a lot of new novels.

### How NaNoWriMo began:

Most great things have an element of accident in them. What happened was, Chris Baty, the founder, way back in 1999, wanted to write a novel. He was an avid reader, and he woke up one

day and said 'How do you do this?' He knew you could buy 'How to write' books, and he knew you could take writing workshops and all that, but he also understood the best way to learn a lot of things is just by doing them, and I think that really holds true to novel writing. 'How to write' books are great, workshops are great, but the best way to learn is to immerse yourself in the experience.

***Chris recruited about twenty of his friends and they met in cafes every night to write together and they accidentally laid the foundations for the things we do today.***

On the one hand we really believe in developing a writing community and writing with others, and we have a variety of ways to support that community, and one great benefit is that it builds accountability. If one of those twenty people didn't show up at the cafe one night to write, then they got the question, 'How's your novel coming?', 'Why weren't you here?' With a group of people around you, like this, you're more likely to succeed if that's the case. They also developed really fun writing games, like pavlovian games, and they would challenge each other. They would say whoever can write the most in the next five minutes will win a latte. They'd all write with gusto and abandon and try to win the latte. And conversely they would say you can't go to the bathroom till you've written a thousand words and, especially after that latte, that is the most motivating writing challenge on the planet.

They all wrote novels and they had fun writing them and they came back the next year and a hundred and fifty people joined them, word spread, and the year after that Chris started a rudimentary website, and five thousand people showed up to write, and then last year we had nearly five hundred thousand people in total, along with our young writers' programme. We say that everyone has a story and everyone's story matters and we see proof of that every year by the number of people who sign up.

# What makes NaNoWriMo different to other writing communities:

We're non-profit, but if the organisation went away, NaNoWriMo would still happen every year and that's because the passionate writers would *make* it happen and they would carry it on. And it's focused on *encouragement*. Everyone is legitimately rooting for the other writers around them to succeed. We're not so focused on the end product, or critiquing, giving feedback or publishing, and the status of hierarchy that naturally comes from that. We're interested in igniting people's creative potential and that's why so many people find their writing home with NaNoWriMo.

## How it inspired Grant:

I didn't even *dream* of writing a novel when I was at high school. I wrote short stories, but I didn't hear about anyone of my age even attempting a novel. I wrote my first novel when I was in my mid-to late-twenties, which I thought was a perfectly good achievement. I'm so amazed; I'll meet teenagers who've not only written one novel, but five or six or seven.

My daughter has done NaNoWriMo as well, and it's so magnificent to go to one of our write-ins with her and actually write with her. We share this creative passion, and I hear these stories all the time about parents writing with their children.

# What if someone is still on the fence about trying it this year?

I read a Tweet today where someone was saying ‘I’m deciding whether or not to do NaNoWriMo, but I’m just not quite feeling the vibe.’ I think that person was talking about inspiration, and I think all too often writers wait for inspiration to come to them, and almost every novel in history that’s been written has a spark of inspiration somewhere in there, but the way that it happens is not *waiting* for that inspiration. You create the inspiration every day you sit down to write. You have to show up and write and create that novel, and I guarantee you’ll find the inspiration in the words you write on the page and just by sitting down and doing it.

So many people stay on the fence year after year after year, no matter whether it’s writing a novel or chasing one of their other creative dreams, and I think there’s something to be said for just doing it. Jumping in. It’s free! You have absolutely nothing to lose. So many people say they want to write a novel ‘Some day’ and we help make that happen ‘today’. You have to view your creative projects with a sense of urgency, and make them happen otherwise you’ll be on the fence your whole life. Too many people hold back from saying that they are a writer. It feels too precious, or you’re not a writer until you’re validated by publishing.

## You’re a writer because you write:

And you have to show up and do it every day and that’s the way all books that we love have been created and that our premise is that all those great books, whether it was written by Tolstoy or Shakespeare or anybody they start out as rough drafts, they were not in the perfect form that we

read them in, a lot of labour has gone into them, that's why we essentially give people permission to write that rough draft. It's not going to look like that novel that you love, but that's not what it's supposed to look like, it's supposed to look like a rough draft.

## A goal and a deadline are a creative midwife:

And I really think that metaphor is true. When you're writing it's really easy to fool yourself about how much you're really progressing. You can be writing that novel for years and never get to that finish line and I know a lot of writers, and I'm certainly guilty of this myself from time to time, that I'll noodle forever on that first chapter, those first five pages, and I feel I need to make them perfect before I can move on. But what that does is create a roadblock. We want you to maintain your progress and focus on that finishing line and *then* come back to those first five pages, or first chapters and that's when you're really going to perfect things.

## Give yourself permission to do it:

Go to [nanowrimo.org](http://nanowrimo.org). It's just like filling out a social media profile, tell us what your novel is about, and you can find friends in our forums and buddy them. And it's important to find your region, there will be a nano community near you. We have volunteers called municipal liaisons and there are thousand of them around the world, they will arrange live writing sessions where people will come together and write together in pubs, cafes, libraries, and community spaces that host NaNoWriMo gatherings. Visit the website, click around and find the resources. We have a very active blog with every day interviews with writers.

## Grant's Top Tip For Writers:

*Give yourself permission, tell yourself you can do it, and sign up.*

# Episode 6: Bryan Cranston - Sneaky Pete Versus Staying Authentic

*We were privileged to speak to actor Bryan Cranston while he was in town promoting his memoir A Life In Parts. Oscar nominated, and a Golden Globe, Tony and Emmy award-winner he's best known for roles in Malcolm In The Middle, Seinfeld and, of course, as Walter White in Breaking Bad. But few people know that he is also an accomplished writer, having written a number of screenplays, plays, and now his memoir, and so we began our conversation by asking to speak to Bryan Cranston the writer...*

## On stories:

These are stories I've been telling for a long time, certainly the ones from my childhood, and then as I go along I realised what makes a good story: conflict, any time you find yourself in confusion or doubt, anything that's seemingly negative or goes a bad way is eventually, or is potentially, going to make a good story. I try to use that as a silver lining...

**If there's a problem in your life, fear not, it could make a good story for you later on.**

## Challenges and surprises in writing the memoir:

The biggest surprise was putting myself emotionally in that position again. Whenever I was writing a story that was particularly harrowing or fearful I felt those feelings again, because in order to truly translate what you're feeling emotionally to the written word I think you need to submerge yourself in it, as opposed to looking at it objectively. I wanted to feel it again and be able to convey that feeling.

## On being a bestseller (his book had just hit the bestseller charts):

I didn't write the book to win an award, I didn't write it to make money, as far as being a bestseller I think it could translate, to me, to mean that the book is resonating, people are finding it and recommending it. You can't get on the New York Times bestseller list unless you've sold a lot of books, and that happens when people recommend it. In fact, I ask a lot of people in the publishing business 'What is the best way to sell a book?' and they always say it's recommendations, when a friend says 'You've got to read this book'.

## On coping with the solitary experience of writing:

I loved it. If I was a writer full time...? You're agonising over being alone because that's what you do, but my main profession is to be in the public eye; I'm on stage or I'm on a film set and there's a lot of people around and you go and promote movies and it's a lot of hubbub, and a lot of social interaction, and quite frankly one of the reasons I wanted to write the book was to be able to still



engage in a creative endeavour and yet be alone. Take myself out of the public eye and be in a cabin or a beach house and just let your mind soar and your imagination be filled with inspiration to write stories and that's what happens, so it was great for me. It wasn't very intimidating because I wasn't writing from page one to page two-seventy-five, it wasn't writing a novel, I was writing short stories from my life, so I already knew the genesis of the story and I just needed to fill it out and document it on paper.

## On writing screenplays:

I enjoy writing. I enjoy telling stories. So whether you're acting, or directing, or writing, it's all related, it's all storytelling. And it's the joy, my professional joy, and I love doing it, so I want to experience all aspects of the storytelling process. I've written a few screenplays, and it's very difficult to get them to a point where they're being optioned and actually being made. I was signing at the bookstore today and a woman came up with a screenplay under her arm and said 'Can I leave you my screenplay?' and (I said) 'You can't.'

## Would he write a novel?

I am intrigued by the notion of writing a novel. And at some point I'd like to take a crack at it. Like this book, I don't know if I'm cut out for that. For instance, I did the narration of an Audible book, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, about a reluctant soldier in Vietnam, and it was book that I wanted to read, but I never got around to it, until I was offered the job of narrating it. And then I was able to read it. And I was a little saddened by that experience, because it told me that I don't permit myself the pleasure of simply reading a book. But if it's work-related, yes you now have permission to go and read a book. I was really disappointed that my life has come to that! That I'm so governed by the work (acting) and trying to take advantage of the opportunities that I've been

afforded, and grateful for, and so I did that and it was not easy for me. I also did the narration for my own book, because I can't imagine some other actor saying my words, but again I had difficulty, because you say a line of dialogue, or a sentence from your book and I go, 'No, no, no, I don't like the way I said that word, I need to go back.' It took me a long time to be able to get through it, much longer than a seasoned pro (of doing narration) would do. And out of that I learned that I don't think I would do a narration of a book again. I struggled a bit on it. There are others who could do that. In that sense, to write a novel, it would be something I would like to try and see if it works out.

## Stay authentic:

I think that's the goal of any creative person is to stay authentic to yourself and your sensibilities, whether you're an actor, dancer, singer, writer. I think that's the quest: to stay honest. If you are invested in the storytelling process and you're with other people who are as well, it's inevitable that you will at some point lock horns, because everyone can't follow the same sensibility, you're going to disagree.

**And it can be done, because you can disagree without becoming disagreeable.**

Artistic frustration is not only expected, it's anticipated and welcome. Sometimes, when you get into an artistic argument, you spot a problem, and you then have to be hyper-focused on it to carve out what's at the root of that problem and often the answer will come to the surface. Without the argument you could have glossed over it, but if you argue a point and do it respectfully you can come to find a better way to tell that beat, or a more honest way to reveal that something, it's actually a tremendous benefit to the artistic process.

# What does he look for in a character?

Did this character have resonance with me? Did I feel for them? And it doesn't mean you have to sympathise, always, or root for the character, but did this character make a mark on you? Did it make you feel or think? And that's imperative to it. I think of Javert in *Les Misérables* where, to me, the strength of that character is that he's so noble and so righteous that it got in his way, and what a wonderfully, beautifully, tragic character that is. With Walter White, at first you're looking at it from an objective viewpoint, because you don't have a relationship to him yet, if it affects you from an objective viewpoint you have to trust your instincts that it will then also affect a wider audience. From that point on, you focus your attention on becoming subjective to the character, that you don't want to stand in judgement of that character, you want to be inside the skin of that character, so that you justify the actions.

**When Walter White was killing people, from my standpoint, I had already justified why this was necessary.**

# What he looks for when choosing a project:

It's always the writing. There's no one element — at *all* — that is more important than the story. I have a CAPS system: the Cranston Assessment of Projects. The first item is story. And I separate the text from the story, because sometimes you'll hear a story and go, 'That's a fantastic story!' and if you read the book, or play, or screenplay you could be disappointed because, 'Oh, they just didn't get it! They didn't capture the essence of that story, it's too bad.' So that's why my first thing is the story: does it resonate? Is it important? What's the benefit to it? What are we really telling? Is it unique? It is a different way to tell a love story? What is it that's different about it? Then if I like that then I go to the actual text. Did this text support that story that I really liked so much? If that's a

yes, then I go to the character? Is this character integral to that story? And so it has to go in that order. After that then it goes to the director: let me meet with the director, and talk to him or her. Are they collaborative? Do they get the same sense, when they read it, that I did? And so you know if you're going in the same direction. There's nothing worse than assuming that's going to happen, and you feel 'Oh, it's definitely going this way,' and you get on the set, or you commit to a play and the director's saying, 'Yes, that's right, it's going *this* way.' And you go, 'Oh my God, this is a different vision, this is not going to work.'

## 'I have a finite time on Earth...'

We have reminders of it (mortality) all the time. We have people dropping dead, you hear of tragedies like that, I think a lot of people will feel that but they may not be in a position to sense an opportunity to make change, and that's unfortunate. I gave a speech once and I wanted to say that I was a kid navigating through a challenging childhood, I became kinda sneaky and duplicitous, and looking for the shortcut, and my family even nicknamed me 'Sneaky Pete'. I then I found something I really loved and devoted my professional life to it and all my energies and intellect and body and soul, and it was a beautiful thing for me to find that. It's not too late. It doesn't mean you have to enter into whatever that it professionally, but if you remember what it was that gave you joy and love, you can reintroduce yourself to that and enhance your life.

**And so for all you Sneaky Petes out there that's my wish for you, to reacquaint yourself with something that brought you love and joy in the past.**

# Episode 7: Michael Connelly - Bosch and Being Relentless

*Michael Connelly is one of the most successful crime authors in the world today. Starting out as a journalist on the crime beat for newspapers in Florida, he was short-listed for the Pulitzer Prize, eventually writing for The LA Times. He has now written nearly thirty novels, which have sold over sixty million copies worldwide, and have been translated into thirty-nine languages, and his main series character, Harry Bosch, now has his own show, which was Amazon Prime's first TV series and has now been renewed for a third season.*

*He was in the UK recently, promoting his new Harry Bosch thriller The Wrong Side of Goodbye, and Mr. Stay managed to grab some time with him in the back of a car between events in his busy schedule...*

What keeps bringing him back to his series character  
Harry Bosch?

Unfinished business. There's always more to say, and that's why I bring him back. There are other characters I've written about and after one or two books I feel like I've said what needs to be said, so it's a hard thing to pinpoint why is there more to say about Harry Bosch. I don't really know, but he just remains intriguing to me and as long as you have that, as a writer, you're going to dive in and go back to those kind of characters.

## Is there a lot of Michael in Harry Bosch?

It's fair to say that *now*. I've written about him for twenty-five years, and initially I wanted to write about someone completely different from me because I had no idea whether that book would ever get published and I wanted to have fun doing that the year or two that I wrote it. So, initially, we were nothing alike and then I got lucky and it got published and then there was a call for another book and another book and over time, keeping that separation was really impossible, so I started sharing more and more with him. Probably, most notably, we have daughters the same age, so the whole fatherhood concept is a shared experience between me and Harry.

## Did he ever worry about running out of steam with a series character?

If you're going to do this for a living, I guess you're going to have some kind of level of confidence that you have more than one character in you. I always felt I would know ahead of any readers or critics that Harry's run out of steam, and it's time to end the series, so I would just come up with something else. I don't want to ever be in a position where I feel like I'm keeping him on life support just so I can kick out another book. When I feel that, I feel it's time to end the series.

## Is his crime fiction redressing all those cold cases from his time as a journalist?

I guess it is in a way. Some of the books I've written have been inspired by stories I wrote as a newspaper reporter, that didn't have endings. I remember when I retired from being a journalist I was clearing out my file cabinets at the newspaper. I had tons of files that I would open when there was a murder, or something that I wrote about. I would create a file and I would write the detective's name and number and put anything that was pertinent to that case in the file, so I'd be ready to go as soon as they caught somebody. And I was getting rid of dozens of files of cases where they didn't catch anybody, so it was a really like cold water in the face that I was leaving that world of reality to become a writer whose books always have everything tied up at the end. So it was kind of a dark day, but it was also a good reminder to *not* tie everything up, there's always going to be loose ends, and yes I have to conclude a big mystery at the end of every book, because that's why people read them. It was a great reminder to not solve everything, to always leave something untied, even if that bothers a reader.

**It's my little acknowledgment that crime fiction is quite different from crime non-fiction.**

Is there a case he would want to go back to and re-open?

Yeah, there's one called the Vic Weiss case, that I actually did write a novel called Trunk Music that kinda solved it. This was a guy who was a car dealer, famous because he did commercials in Los Angeles, who was found in the trunk of his car, shot to death, his Rolls Royce, in fact. And that was never solved, and I got to know the detectives on that case pretty well and spent time with them and they had their theories, but they had nothing they could ever prove. And it's a lasting mystery in Los Angeles, and it would be really interesting to know what really happened.

On making an emotional connection with the reader.

It's really important for me as a writer. I just don't want to write a perfectly-honed plot. To me that's window dressing. I always want to have a character at the centre of the story and that brings in the emotional stakes and so forth. And that's how I get through a year of writing a book, that's quite a different thing than reading a book that can take you two-three days a week. So I have to make sure I'm plugged in to write the book and if it works for me then it will work for the reader. But I also think that's what the readers are looking for.

**There is a percentage that just want to be fooled, or they want to outsmart the writer, and all that's fine, but I think generally readers are looking for an emotional connection with a character. An emotional experience.**



# Has a reader ever given him feedback that surprised him?

It's happened a few times. It's funny, usually someone gets a higher meaning or metaphor out of something that you either had no idea about, or it was my subconscious, but it is there and it works. And, of course, your answer is always, 'Oh yeah, I meant that.'

# How has his writing technique changed since he started?

The big change is the distractions outside of writing. The actual work when you're at your desk for me hasn't changed. The changes are *getting* to that desk, getting the time to get there. There's a TV show now, based on Bosch, that I'm involved in, there's book tours and so forth, and my life has gotten more complicated and by that I mean it makes the time that I'm in a room by myself, in the locked room by myself, trying to create and write, it makes those times more precious, because they're harder to get to. That room hasn't changed, but I would say one thing that has changed is my ever-developing skill to be able to write when I'm not in that room. Like when I'm writing on planes, the back of cars, while waiting for planes, in hotel rooms, all that stuff. It's kinda weird, it's come back full circle to journalism where you just had to write every day and sometimes you had to write on the telephone, calling someone who's writing it for you and working it out over the phone and so forth. More of a catch-as-catch-can lifestyle and writing style and that's more like that now for me.

## Does he outline before writing?

I went through many years of never outlining, and never putting anything on paper, it was just more fun to write that way. In my head I would know the beginning and the end and that's all I needed to start off. And then, about four years ago, we started working on the television show based on Bosch, and we have a writing staff and we sit in a room and essentially outline: we put three-by-five cards up on the wall for each episode and they're very heavily outlined in that way. And I began to see the merit in that, and that's influenced my writing as of late. I don't do the cards on the wall-type thing, but now I'm writing more stuff down in a notebook. Maybe that's a function of age, or I'm worried that I'm gonna forget it or something? I wrote maybe twenty books without ever putting anything on paper other than the book itself. I don't do that so much anymore.

I've enjoyed being in those rooms (on the TV show) where things are talked out. I'm so used to being in a room by myself, where I guess I could talk to myself if I wanted to, but basically it's just me against the blank screen of the computer.

## Did he have an endgame when he started?

I decided I wanted to specifically write crime fiction — not just 'I want to be a novelist' — when I was nineteen, and I didn't publish a book until I was thirty-five, so it was a long process. First you want to see if you can accomplish it, second you want to see if you can be published, third you want to see if you can do it again. It's too much of a long shot proposition to ever be thinking about becoming a bestseller, or hitting the top of the charts, or anything like that. I'd be lying if I didn't say I didn't think about that, once I was established and things were going well. If you have the ego of a storyteller, if you think the stories you write should be read and heard and watched, then you do think about the larger scale of things as you go along. But when I'm writing my first book that's not

even a concept. The concept is, 'I hope this is a good book, I hope that someone other than my mother will read it one day.'

## Does it take a lot of ego to write?

I guess so, I think it's impossible not to put some of yourself in there. I don't know if that comes out of ego, or if that comes out of 'This is what I have, this is what I can reach, this is what I can fold into a story,' but there has to be an ego. Harry Bosch has the ego that tells him that he's better and smarter and more relentless than any of the opponents that he comes up against. He needs that. That lights his fire. So I think from the writing standpoint I go into it believing that this book I'm about to write, or am in the middle of writing, or finishing, should be published, should be celebrated, should be read by everybody, way more than whatever happens, but I think you gotta do that. It's a long process. I'm actually a fast writer, but to me it's a long process to write one book a year, to start with zero pages and zero words on the screen and know that you need a hundred thousand of them and they gotta be all connected and make sense and be thrilling and hit all the points that a reader wants in a book. It's a bit daunting at the beginning, so I think it does take that kind of ego.

## What happens on those days when you're not feeling it?

Every writing teacher tells you this: if you're going to be a writer, you gotta write every day, even if you only get fifteen minutes in. I do practice that, when I start a draft of a book I write every day, at least fifteen minutes, until I'm done with that draft, and then I might take a week off, and then I'll go back and rewrite. So it's not like I write every day of my life, but when I start a project I write on it

every day until I get it done. And sometimes it truly is only fifteen minutes, because of things going on in your life, or hardships in the story.

**But, if you hit a wall in the story I don't think the answer is to take a day off. What I do is back-up and rewrite and usually create a momentum that takes me through the stalled part.**

## Does he write sequentially or does he write the fun parts first?

It's A to Z for me. You know there'll be a great chapter ahead, or a fun chapter, but jumping ahead to it... to me it's like a reward if you get there. So don't skip a part to get there. Fight your way through to get there and there's a reward.

## What's next from Michael?

Keeping my head down and continuing to write. It's the distractions that I fight now, that keep me from being in a room by myself and writing. I'm always trying to find my way back to that room.

## What's he reading at the moment?

I read less and less, because I can write most times before reading. So, on a plane I don't read, I write. I don't really take vacations. I might be on a Caribbean island somewhere but I'm sitting there with my laptop. When I do have time to read I would rather read non-fiction, biographies, things like that, that may have an inspirational effect on me. Reading about someone and how they

create music — I have a huge collection of biographies of jazz musicians — and something about the way they create music is inspiring to me in terms of putting words on the page. And I write crime fiction so I got to keep my hand in crime fiction. I dabble around. Yesterday I picked up ‘The Plea’ by Steve Cavanagh, which is in the realm of ‘The Lincoln Lawyer’ so I’ll want to read about that and read what he’s doing and maybe there’s something there that will inspire something in the Lincoln Lawyer guy, so you never know. It’s good to be all over the place. I don’t religiously read any one author anymore, because I don’t have the time to do that and also see what’s new out there.

**I think from the outside people think writers are all competitive.**

The fact is no one reads just one book a year so there’s room for all of us to be successful and it’s more of an encouraging-type thing, so I’m not gonna read Steve’s book and think ‘I have to top this’, I’ll read it and probably have good feelings that somebody else is doing this well.

## Michael’s Top Tip For Writers:

**Be relentless. Write every day. Let it take over your life.**

I hate to say it but you’ve got to sacrifice... not *complete* relationships, but you have to put relationships on hold and the writing should always come first. If you have a family, you find a balance, you can’t sacrifice a family relationship, but I constantly face a battle with my own family because I work at home and it appears I lead a life of leisure that my wife or my kid think I can just go do something, and I am constantly saying ‘No, I’m working.’

# Episode 8: NaNoWriMo - The Muddy Middle With Grant Faulkner

*We were delighted to welcome NaNoWriMo's Grant Faulkner back to the podcast in mid-November, where we discussed strategies for coping with what they call the 'muddy middle' or the 'swampland'. Those second-act blues where a storyteller can get completely lost or overwhelmed.*

## How can we keep going in the muddy middle?

Every novel idea holds so much promise and once you decide on your idea you get excited by it, every writer does or you wouldn't do it, so all of us plunge in and start writing with gusto and exuberance and speed at first, and it can feel *too* easy sometimes. Those first gusts of wind are just so powerful, but any book, any short story, any poem is going to hit the wall at some point. Writing a novel is all about showing up, building it through small increments, it's all about facing down your bad days: we might get sick, or we might have a busy week at work, and so we do a number of things. We send these wonderful pep talks by famous authors. In the past we've had Neil Gaiman, Dave Eggers, Lois Lowry, and Charlaine Harris. Those help because you're hearing it from the pros that it's not just you, perhaps, an amateur or beginning writer who has this problem.

**The most accomplished writers on the planet have this problem too.**

You have to plan for this. It's going to happen. About ninety percent of people don't achieve their New Year's resolutions, and I think that happens with anything big. If you stop going to the gym in the third week of January, instead of giving up for the year, just accept that you're going to have a bad day or a bad week.

**It's important to keep writing, even if you only finish with twenty-five thousand words.**

**Recalibrate your goals and just keep writing.**

## On NaNoWriMo's Success Rate

We have a lot of bestsellers that have come from NaNoWriMo. We can't track all of them, but we've heard from hundreds of authors who've published their novels traditionally, and thousands and thousands who've self-published, so it's just amazing. Many younger writers are doing NaNoWriMo, even before they're eighteen, and I go to conferences and I'll talk to writers under twenty-five and I swear that seventy-five percent of them have done NaNoWriMo, so I have theory that in the future a huge percentage of bestsellers will be written, or had their start, in NaNoWriMo in some form.

**Every time I pop on Twitter I hear someone mention that they published their NaNoWriMo novel.**

It's a writing bootcamp. People learn how to *be* writers during NaNoWriMo, they learn how to show up every day, how to be accountable, and they learn how to just plunge into stories and take those creative risks to connect with readers. It's wonderful training for how to write a novel. It's a huge achievement to write fifty-thousands words and I think that the creative determination leads to the

sort of determination you need to have to take it to the next steps, because revision and publishing themselves are arduous.

## And do people continue writing after NaNoWriMo?

Absolutely. They're creating the habit to write, and it's a difficult habit to create. I think it was Dorothy Parker who said, 'I hate writing, I prefer *having* written,' which really is the perfect state for a writer, there is no greater thing than having the writing done. I always refer to the psychological research that said it takes thirty days to create a new habit, I'm not sure how accurate that is, but I think there's something to it. And I hear that once people do NaNoWriMo — writing for thirty days — that gives them the creative momentum to keep writing year round and I think that's really important. To prioritise your creativity and to take that rough draft of fifty thousand words and take it to the next level.

## Anyone can do this:

You're a writer because you write, that's the definition. You're not a writer because you're published, that's something else entirely. And we do hear those stories. One of our very first published novels was *Time Off For Good Behaviour* by Lani Diane Rich, she was in Alaska, she discovered NaNoWriMo really randomly, I think it was on Halloween eve, and she thought 'What the hell, I'll do it' and she wrote a novel.



## We validate creativity for creativity's sake:

Some people write novels with no publishing goal, they write just to write and that's perfectly wonderful, just like people who just like to dance. They're not necessarily going to take their Friday night dancing into a professional career. We believe that everyone has a story to tell and that everyone's story matters.

**We're not gatekeepers, we're gatecrashers, because we want to open the world of publishing and writing so that everyone's voices are heard.**

That's more important than ever in the world we're seeing today. They say that you can't hate another person once you know their story, and so I think the more stories we get out there, the more voices that are heard, the world *will* change and the world *can* change through our stories.

## It's never too late:

We've had people start late in November, either that or they've picked up after a fallow period, and heroically they've reached the fifty-thousand word mark within a week! It can be done. Set a word count goal for ten days of fifteen thousand words. Try it out, especially if it's your first time, it's like you're getting the feel of it and training for the next NaNoWriMo. I should mention that we have a more casual version of NaNoWriMo called Camp NaNoWriMo and that happens in April and July.

## Grant's advice for those stuck in the muddy middle...

*Just keep plodding. It might not be fun to plod, but you're going to get out of that muddy middle and you'll see the finish line on the horizon and you're going to feel so great once you have finished that novel, once you've hit fifty-thousand words. It's a gift to yourself and a gift to the world, so just keep plodding. And you can make it fun!*

# Episode 9: Joe Abercrombie -

## Dancing Naked In The Rain

*Joe burst onto the fantasy genre scene in 2003 with his debut **The Blade Itself**, which is now published in thirteen countries. Since then he has continued writing in the **First Law** universe, and his second standalone book in the series, **The Heroes**, reached number 3 in the **Sunday Times** bestseller list, and his third standalone **Red Country** was both a **Sunday Times** and **New York Times** bestseller. He's also written a **Young Adult** trilogy called **The Shattered Sea** and his most recent work is a collection of short stories from the **First Law** called **Sharp Ends**. We caught up with Joe at **GollanczFest**, where he gave some unusual advice for writers and fans of nudity...*

### On Writing Short Stories:

I'm not really a natural short story writer. My first few books were all big, long stories, as fantasy books often are, but I was approached about the possibility of contributing to a couple of anthologies, and that seemed like a good idea, and so I started writing short stories for that reason, really.

There is a certain kind of short story, the classic short story, a beautifully self-contained episode with its own twist, and its own comment, and its own theme. That's a particular art form that I'm not sure I have. I tend to do more individual scenes that hopefully have a twist and a point to them. I can explore a lighter tone, which I like and don't normally work in. A different tone, a different set of

characters, different situation, and ones that intersect with familiar characters and places, and hopefully readers who have read the books will find some (new) little corners explored.

## Art vs Commerce:

I'm not someone that believes that art and commerce have to be in opposition. I think the best art often results from a lot of commercial constraints. I think you can see the difference between the first three Star Wars films — where there were all kinds of creative constraints of time and money and what could be done technically — that produced far better, disciplined filmmaking than when you could do anything you wanted with the second trilogy. Often those commercial constraints and those thoughts of 'What's going to work for my audience?' help to channel and discipline what you want to do. I don't think it means that you're always asking yourself 'What will the audience like?' You're not aiming for the lowest common denominator, you're still aiming to please yourself and to try and be edgy and do something that doesn't pull punches. At the same time I like things that are broadly, relatively commercial. I'm not into obscurantism, 'Some people like this, therefore I can't... because I'm too clever for that.' I like to write things that I want to feel that are things that readers would like.

## Joe's Writing Habit:

There are times, when I'm on holiday, or weekends, when I'm not always going to manage it, but usually if I'm in the midst of a book I'll manage between one or two thousand words a day. That's what I'm aiming for if I'm drafting. And then at the weekend I'll usually manage to find time to do a few hundred, usually to top up a couple of days where I've fallen short, generally. So I'm aiming to do six to ten thousand words a week. I try to resist the temptation to think of writing as something very creative and terribly mysterious and magical, and try and look at it as work. In the end it's

easy to write and make progress when you're feeling inspired, but that won't happen always. Inspiration will get you through your first book, your first three books, and then you reach a point where inspiration inevitably withers a little — you still have your moments — the craft and dedication and good old British values of hard work have to come to the fore, and you have to find a way to make progress every day, even when you're very down on what you're doing and when you're not feeling terribly into it, you've got to keep on grinding away. It's about that chair time.

***What marks the professional, I guess, is that ability to make progress when you're not feeling that inspired.***

## On Writing 9 to 5:

I'm not terribly regular in that sense. Usually I have some bits going on in the day: my children go off to school, and they come back at three or four and it becomes a bit harder to work when they're around, and I get dragged into things. It's hard to be fully disciplined, on the clock, in that way. When I'm really into a book and things are going well, I'll do a session in the morning and then I'll keep dipping in for an hour, hour-and-a-half, chunks throughout the day, and probably write a little bit when everybody's gone to bed. I'll be working at an extremely inefficient and unproductive level *all* the time, rather than compartmentalising and effectively using my time.

## Social Media And Other Distractions:

Very few writers are made or broken by their social media presence. Being good on Twitter is not going to sell really bad books, and likewise being terrible on Twitter isn't going to spoil the career of someone who writes great books. In the end it's your books that are the thing. But if you enjoy having some contact with your readers, which is nice to do, writing can be quite a lonely

profession, you sit there wrestling with your demons, so it's nice to have some contact with people and to remember there are people out there who enjoy what you do. I don't think you should see it as work that needs to be done, insofar as you enjoy being on Twitter and being involved with other writers and readers, it's a good thing to do.

## Advice To His Younger Self:

It's turned out very well in hindsight. At the time there was a period when I was trying to get published and I was submitting to agents and being rejected and that was very hard, and you do constantly ask yourself 'Is this good?' To be a writer you need this towering self-confidence that says what I've got to say is interesting, that I can fascinate someone with this story to the point where they'll want to give me money for it. That's a real arrogance you need to do that. And, at the same time, you've got to have a certain degree of self-doubt so that it doesn't become a completely self-obsessed thing and that you have the doubt to go over and over things and refine them and revise them and learn and improve. You're constantly trying to keep those two things in balance when you're submitting to agents and publishers, and if you're getting rejected — which all writers do, after all — it can be hard because that doubting part of yourself will grow and be fed. So I'd tell myself you've got to keep bashing away and keep trying to be as confident as you can and persist and hopefully things will pay off.

***It's always a strange stroke of luck that brings any writer a deal, but the longer you dance around naked in the rain the more likely you are to be struck by lightning.***

## Advice From His Mum:

The one piece of advice that really stood out for me was from my mum, because all the best advice comes from mum, and this was when she first read some of my work — I finally plucked up the courage to show my mother my work — and many people will say don't trust the opinions of your parents because they'll always say it's wonderful... Not my mum. The most savage of critics, is my mother.

She said you've got to be honest. Always. You've got to be truthful — and this was some clichéd shite I'd put down — and she said any metaphor you write, rather than reaching for the easy cliché, ask yourself 'Is this real? Is this true? Is this the way the thing really looks? Is this the way the thing really feels? Don't just reach for a thing that sounds clever or fits the rhythm. Reach for the thing that is true and genuine. And apply that to everything; the way things look, the way things feel, what the characters say. Would someone really say that thing? Is this the way people really speak?' And if you're always asking yourself, 'Is this true?', hopefully there'll be some kind of spark of honesty there that can make the most clichéd scenes seem truthful all over again. Because often, I think, people don't want things that are new, necessarily. They want the familiar told in a new way, they want the familiar with an authentic voice. Originality can be very overrated, I think. It's like curry powder: a little goes a very long way.

## Joe's Top Tip For Writers:

***Find your own voice. Honesty, again, is connected to that. Don't write what you think people want to read, don't write something that's like something else. Try and find your own voice and say what you genuinely think. Don't say what you think you're supposed to think. What***

*I react to when I read a book, when I find myself really enjoying a book, is that voice, that authenticity, that sense of someone describing something, saying something in a way I would never do myself that feels entirely real and believable. A vivid voice is what I always react to, and in the end that's more important than any of the details of what your story is or the kinds of characters you're writing about, it's that sense of being talked to by someone fascinating.*



# Episode 10: Robin Stevens -

## Middle Grade Murder & Bun Time

*Robin Stevens is the author of the Murder Most Unladylike Mysteries books, a middle grade series following schoolgirl detectives Daisy Wells and Hazel Wong in a 1930s English boarding school with an extremely high mortality rate. Robin is a multiple award-winning author, whose books are available worldwide and translated in numerous languages, but few know that Robin started out on her bestselling adventure with NaNoWriMo.*

### What part did NaNoWriMo play in Robin's career?

I didn't know it was kick-starting my career at the time. It was 2010, and I had just left university, I always knew I wanted to write a book, I wanted to be an author, but I had never actually sat down and finished a novel as an adult, and I heard about NaNoWriMo and I thought that I should give it a go. On about the 29th October, I went to a cafe, wrote down the title, wrote down the victim, the murderer, and then went for it on the first of November.

*I wrote a horrible first draft over that month. It didn't actually end. It just sort-of stopped at 50,025 words, because I was just sick of it.*

Then I came back to it the next spring, and I thought there might actually be something to it, almost completely re-wrote the whole book, gave it an ending, re-wrote it again. In 2013 I sent it out to agents, I found one — Gemma Cooper — she sold it to what was then Random House and it came out in 2014.

## Did she ever dream of getting published?

I think I didn't understand what being published was, or what an author was as a career. I knew I loved storytelling, I loved writing, I loved reading and I definitely wanted to do that as an adult — in a really sort-of dim way, when I was a child — and then I grew-up and learnt more about books and really started thinking about that as a career path. It did seem like a dream, it did seem impossible, so I wrote the book really on a whim as something I would want to read, not really *for* anyone.

I thought it could never happen. Who has ever read a book where children solve murders? I couldn't think of any other book that existed like that. So I went a bit crazy and wrote this book and I remember wondering who it was for, showing it to my mother and asking 'What is this book? Have I written a children's book? Have I written an adult book?' and it wasn't until I found my agent and she said to me, 'Let's make this into a book for children,' that it clicked in my head and I realised who I was writing for.

## What made her persevere after that first terrible

### NaNoWriMo draft?

I'd been to boarding school, and I found it to be a *little* bit like Enid Blyton, but also quite a lot *not* like Enid Blyton, and I was always very interested in the distance between reality and the book world that I had read about. The idea of setting a book in a boarding school as something that I had wanted to do for a long time, it was percolating in my head, so this was a book that I had meant to write for a long time.

***NaNoWriMo was just the impetus for me to sit down and do it, so yes it was my first try, but I had been writing little bits of things for a long time, and those were my practices, and this was the moment where I sat down and said, ‘Let’s make this real.’***

## On the importance of an elevator pitch:

Getting the original idea for my books was like when you get a dart, throw it at the ceiling and it sticks. You couldn’t have done it on purpose, but you just randomly did it. If I had been thinking about it now, I would be ‘That’s a brilliant idea!’ but at the time I just did it. Now I look back and think ‘Well done!’ After I wrote the book, I worked in publishing for a while, and I learnt that the thing you really should do is have an elevator pitch for your book. Have one sentence that sums up the plot and the idea to get the other person listening to go ‘Oh!’ And saying Agatha Christie meets Enid Blyton is pretty much what my elevator pitch would have been.

## Robin’s tips for getting through NaNoWriMo:

The first tip is to be just really hard on yourself. Make yourself write those 1667 words per day. Just do it. I remember when I did it I rounded up to 1670, because I wanted to be three words ahead of my goal every day.

***I learned to be really rigorous with myself, even on the days when I didn’t know what I was doing.***

I remember because I really hadn’t planned that much — and I would advise anybody writing NaNoWriMo to at least have a basic idea of where you’re going — which I really did not, and I didn’t have time for things like making up people’s names. I was also working at Blackwells

booksellers full-time, I was coming home late at night and writing, exhausted and confused. Everybody didn't have names, just question marks. Daisy and Hazel would just go and talk to a suspect 'Question mark' and turn to their friend 'Question mark', so I would say force it through.

***Don't worry about fancy details, just get that plot down, get the words down, and then you can go back and change them.***

I would also say that it's really important to remember that all first drafts are awful. You're not writing beautiful prose. I recently wrote the first draft of my sixth book, and about halfway through I just realised that I couldn't write books, I was a horrible author, I couldn't plot, I was basically going to be fired from my job.

***I emailed a friend, who's also a writer, and she asked, 'How many words are you at? Are you at thirty-three thousand words?' I said, yes I am. She said, 'That's the moment when everybody wants to give up, everybody cries and despairs and says that they just can't do it.'***

If you just keep writing, just keep putting words on the page, then you will somehow just get through the middle bit to the exciting bit at the end that you've always wanted to write. As soon as she told me that, I thought back and I realised every single time it's about thirty-three thousand words that you want to give up, and I think that's where people do give up, but my tip would be just keep writing words, and you can get to the end, and you can make it better.

## The importance of finishing:

For anyone doing NaNoWriMo, I wouldn't recommend *not* finishing your book! I *did* know where I was going, I think I didn't finish it because I did have a really clear idea of who the murderer was going to be, how they would unmask them, but I was just exhausted. I had never written a mystery novel, I had *read* them a lot, but I didn't really understand how to actually go about writing one. By going back to the book in the spring and finishing it I was able to make a tighter middle and then get to the end in a much more triumphant way. Endings are hard, as any author will tell you, and I was perhaps slightly nervous about doing it the first time around, feeling so stressed at the end of November.

I usually have quite a clear idea of the denouement scene where they unmask the murderer and it's really exciting and I just wanted to get to it and I can never be bothered with the middle bit, with the walking around and investigating it. Every single time my editor reads the first draft and says 'Could they find a few more clues? Could they actually go and investigate the suspects instead of just sitting there and talking to each other?' And, of course, the lightbulb switches on and I go, 'Surely they should!' and the second draft is a lot more active.

***Thank goodness for my editor. Editors are incredible human beings.***

## Does Robin present an outline to her editor before the first draft?

As they're murder mysteries I want my editor to be my first reader, to check and see if she can get the mystery, or if she is confused or fooled. Actually, I don't want her confused. I want that correct balance of not being sure, but being almost there. What I will do is give her a character list of all of the people who are going to be in the book, not telling her who the murderer and the victim are and then, inevitably, she comes back and says there are too many characters here, and so I cut them out. She is somebody who always helps me hone and tighten it.

## The importance of rewrites:

When I visit schools, I tell the kids I do maybe five drafts per book and their mouths drop open. The first draft is the horrible NaNoWriMo draft, where nobody has a name and the plot doesn't make any sense. Then my editor will look at it and suggest a lot of really big, broad changes, and I'll go back in and rewrite perhaps half of the words. It's always massive. And then the third, fourth and fifth draft are getting tighter and tighter. Fewer things are changing each time. My books wouldn't be as good as they were if I stopped at the second draft, *especially* if I stopped at the first draft. I need those rewrites to make the book what the reader will read.

The first draft is like making a skeleton, you're putting the bones together, and you're not doing it quite right, some of the bones are facing the wrong way, and it doesn't look great. The second draft you're starting to put on flesh, and by the end you've clothed them and they look beautiful and you put make-up on them and they're ready to walk out the door.

## When does she know the book is finished and ready to go?

The deadline! A slightly pat response, but at the moment I'm writing two books a year and so I have to be quick in doing each draft. My editor and I have to work together to get the thing polished and beautiful by the time it needs to be printed. And I do think that NaNoWriMo was the most incredible learning (curve) for that. These days when I'm doing a first draft I will do two thousand words a day, and I think that has to have come from NaNoWriMo. It's not too many words, that's about two hours really solid, strong writing.

***NaNoWriMo really taught me how to write quickly, how to write un-fussily and just get it done.***

And then editing it over the next year taught me how to go back and polish. NaNoWriMo taught me the structure I keep using today.

## Word count versus time:

I think word count is the more useful way of structuring your day. If you're saying I'm going to write for four hours you're going to end up spending it on Twitter or making a Pinterest board. Something is going to come up.

***But if you say I have to write two thousand words, then the computer will not lie, and will tell you you've not written two thousand words.***

NaNoWriMo also taught me how to write fast, so generally I know that will take me about two to three hours of pretty quick work, and then I go on with the rest of my day.

## Using Pinterest and research:

I have a Pinterest board for each book. I always like to find old pictures of locations that I'm sending my characters to, or what a bun would have looked like in the 1930s. Things do change. I'm writing historical novels, and sometimes I'll describe things and I'm thinking 'I'm describing the way that would look now,' and I'll need to go and Google or look through historical books. I've got a massive book of adverts from the 1930s that I use a lot to get the way, for example, a chocolate bar might have looked then.

There's always *something* that slips though. I try hard, but what I end up having to say to myself and to readers is that I'm trying to get more the atmosphere of the time and place than being rigorously, *rigorously* correct. I'm trying to get the Agatha Christie *feel* rather than just writing a history book for you.

I use my historical research first, to basically understand what was going on at the time, so a character can say 'Jolly old king' and I know who that was. But my story has to be the murder, it has to be about the characters, it can't be about what it was like in 1935. In my new book, *Mistletoe and Murder*, 1935's Christmas was one of the warmest Christmases on record, but in my book it snows and snows and snows, because I've written a Christmas novel.

## Transatlantic translations:

I'm very lucky that my books have been sold in other territories, and have been translated into French, German, Italian, Taiwan has got them now, they're going to be in Thai, in Polish, and



obviously as well in America. It's actually a different publisher who publishes me in America, it's Simon & Schuster instead of Puffin, so I've got completely different covers, completely different titles for the first two, it's really been fascinating. It's almost been a process of translation, because we have to change some words, like 'term' they want to change to 'semester', so American kids who might not know much about England can understand. Most of the changes are quite small, little cosmetic things, nothing about the plot. My favourite translation is 'games knickers' in English, but they wear 'athletic underwear' in America.

I got my UK publisher first, and then my agent could show them the book, and ask if they were interested, so I think it was about six months after I got my UK deal, I got my US deal, so it was before the first book was published. The US books are being published much more slowly, so only two of them are out there at the moment, which is a little bit odd. It's like going back in time. I'm checking the third book in the US and writing the fifth book in the UK simultaneously.

## Looking back at her earlier books, would she have changed anything?

It was nice. I liked reading through them again and remembering where I was when I wrote them the first time and remembering characters as well. After writing five books I really do my best to keep characters consistent, but there are little details that are nice to bring forward into the newer books.

# How do you write a murder mystery for children without traumatising them?

I work really hard to keep it *not* gory. I do the trick where the body vanishes, it goes away somewhere so the kids can't actually go and peer at a corpse. I try to keep it as much of a puzzle as I can. There *are* bodies, it's acknowledged in all the books that people really are dead, but I also try to make sure that it feels like a game, something a bit fun as well as something quite real. I'm always trying to walk that tightrope, but also with middle grade you can get away with a whole lot if you just keep the perspective right, keep it child-like, and you can talk about stuff that you know is going to go over the head of younger readers, they're just not going to care or be interested, and an older reader might just read something else into what you're saying, something a child would miss, so it's like an extra-special Easter egg for older readers rather than having something that would upset younger readers. Kids watch the news, they're very up on what's happening in the world, and things that are happening among adults, which is really what the series is all about for me: it's about kids watching adults and trying to understand the adult world, and I do that from a child's perspective, and I'm doing something that I think every kid is doing which is trying to understand the adults around them. Normally, the adults around them aren't murderers, but y'know, it's a continuum.

## Robin's Top tip for writers:

***The main thing is write the book that you want to read, that you're going to love writing, that's going to make you excited, because sixty-thousand words, or ninety-thousand, or a***

*hundred-and-twenty-thousand, those are a lot of words and that's a lot of days sitting in front of the computer, so you might as well enjoy yourself and write something that's really exciting. And that excitement will be passed onto the readers when they eventually look at it... after you've edited it fives times. Please edit your book.*

# Episode 12: Maria Semple -

## Beware The Voice Of Self-

### Sabotage

*Maria Semple was recently named a “Power Author” by the Hollywood Reporter, putting her alongside such giants as JK Rowling and George RR Martin. As a screenwriter she got her first break on Beverly Hills, 90210, was nominated for an Emmy for Mad About You, and has written for Suddenly Susan, Ellen, and Arrested Development. Her first novel was This One Is Mine (2008), but it was her second book, Where’d You Go, Bernadette? that spent over a year on the New York Times bestseller list and will soon be made into a film directed by Richard Linklater. We were delighted to catch up with her during her whirlwind UK tour for her new book Today Will Be Different.*

The difference between writing for TV and writing novels:

The solitary nature of writing novels is the first clear difference. You’re alone in a room and your time is your own, and there’s no budget constraints, and there’s no actors walking in saying ‘I refuse to say that line,’ and you don’t have a lot of (other) writers shouting at you while you’re trying to think and come up with a line. I much prefer writing novels, I really like being in control of my

time and I feel like I have a strong voice and it's easier for me to put it directly on the page, instead of collaborating.

## On finding her voice:

It was difficult, and I think I'm getting stronger with my voice as I go, and I feel this book, *Today Will Be Different*, is by far the purest, most-realised version of my voice. I was a TV writer for many years and I took one writing class, and I left after the first session. But, in that first session there was a really important exercise we had to do, and the reason I left was because I felt that no one understood the exercise, but it was just simply, 'Write how you talk.' And I just wrote how I talk, because I know how to write how I talk, and I did it, and it was very easy for me.

It blew my mind how many people were unable to write the way they spoke. You would just be having a conversation with them by the coffee maker, and then they'd stand up (and read) and it was so stilted and nothing like the way they talked. I knew that the class wasn't for me when the teacher said we might spend the next five sessions learning how to write how you talk, and I thought 'Okay, I don't need to do this.'

I think it's really important to start off by being able to write how you talk, even if it means recording yourself and then transcribing it, and getting a sense of what your natural rhythms are, your word choices and the cadence. I think that once you can do that, that's the *beginning* of finding your voice. It isn't *necessarily* your voice, writing how you talk, but I'm saying that kind of loosens you up and taps you into something that's very personal and of you. And from that point you can start to build.

**And for people who are having a difficult time, I really do recognise that it is very difficult, I would just start every day by trying to write a page of how you talk.**

## The Voice Of Self-Sabotage:

When I speak to aspiring writers, so many people say to me 'I would write that, but it would offend people, and I don't want to hurt somebody's feelings.' I think that's the voice of self-sabotage. Anytime someone says that to me I just say obviously you don't want to write a book, and you're using that as an excuse to stop, and to put down your arms before you've even started the fight. I don't believe in that. I think that if you are starting to write close to home, I think it's really easy to change the details in the fifteenth draft, y'know? Just change the physical characteristics, change a lot of identifiable things about them and often they don't recognise themselves at all, which has happened to me, or to the extent that when they do recognise themselves they're like 'Oh, it's just a little part of me.'

## Revenge:

I also think it's important *not* to write from a place of revenge. I think if you want to write for some emotional reason to get back at someone then that's bad. You are an artist first and foremost, and the people in your life, the relationships in your life, and the things that you observe in your life are the colours of your palette and you should use those and turn them into art. It doesn't mean that it all has to be hatchet jobs.

## On Being True And Real:

I've written three books and right now I have no pause about it, because I've seen what happens when you put yourself out there, and in my experience the more I put myself out there the greater I

get rewarded. I really think that's the leap of faith somebody has to take. If you start from a place of hiding and of not wanting to be true and real and not wanting to expose yourself, you're going to write something terrible. Just find another job, don't be a writer.

**You need to write only what *you* can write. That means you have to tap into something very personal and that's unique to you, and that is yourself.**

## Common mistakes by new writers:

They don't have enough story in their books. Action is really important and I think people don't even know what a scene is. I teach a class that's a scene class, and it sometimes takes me three sessions to even explain what a scene is. You need to get the book started, make enough happen, and the way you make things happen is to have characters take action, and that's the most important thing. You need is to know what action is, and what an active character is, and my advice is to look at screenwriting books. Books about writing fiction don't really talk about this, and I think it's all in screenwriting books, like Robert McKee's 'Story'. That is indispensable. I have that on my desk and I flip through and there are chapters that are highlighted and the corners of pages are turned down, and every time I'm writing a novel I will pick it up and check myself, because it means you'll be writing an action-packed story, and that's really pleasurable to readers and that's why you do it.

## Maria's Top Tip For Writers:

***When you write, it has to come from a place of generosity. You're doing it for your readers, so giving them a fast-moving story really is a generous act. It's a wonderful thing to give to readers.***

# Episode 13: Michelle Paver -

## Research To The Extreme

*Michelle Paver has written eighteen novels, including the bestselling Chronicles Of Ancient Darkness series. More recently, she has turned her hand to writing chilling ghost stories and her latest, Thin Air, is set in the Himalayas. Michelle's books always benefit from her rigorous research and she's been known to swim with killer whales, run with wolves and encounter polar bears, all of which enriches her books. We spoke to her on the eve of the publication of Thin Air...*

### What's the key to giving readers the chills?

I re-read M.R. James. He studied ghost stories to see how it was done, so I studied (his writing), and I think there are several keys, and I think you've got to get them all in perfect balance. One of the things you need to have is a very realistic setting. Atmospheric, obviously. It could be unusual, it could be not so-unusual, but it's got to feel *real*. You've got to make the reader believe in the setting so that then they'll believe in the haunting.

*Your ghost has to have an intention. Personally I think they should be malevolent, but that's just a personal preference.*

You need to suggest, rather than in-your-face horror. Corner of the eye stuff. That's where ghosts breed. It's in the shadows. In the reader's imagination. I think it works better if you have a



progressive haunting. You start with little hints that something is not right, and then it gets more and more into the foreground, but still just using suggestions. You need a good story. You need to keep turning the pages. Imagine a whole load of plates spinning on poles. You've got to keep that all in balance. If one of them drops, your ghost story is going to fail. Personally, I think it's the hardest thing to write. Dark Matter was the hardest thing I'd ever written... until I tried Thin Air. Because there you've got a mountain, I've got to make it very easy to understand the mountain's topography, and because I can't understand descriptions of mountains in books, I just glaze over.

## Research: When Google is not good enough

I don't try to put myself in danger, and I confess I'm not a mountaineer, so I did not climb Kangchenjunga, which is only a few hundred feet lower than Everest, and yes, some of my research is library-based, but I don't use Google. It just doesn't help me, except maybe to check out travel arrangements. With Thin Air I wrote pretty much the first draft, but felt that I really had to go there. I have been up mountains before, but I couldn't use those. I needed to go to the Himalayas. I needed to hike through the foothills. As it turned out, the trip I was on was an eight day hike towards Kangchenjunga, going from about six thousand feet to about fifteen thousand feet. Enough to experience altitude sickness.

***Sadly I didn't (get altitude sickness), which was annoying. I would have liked to have done that.***

There's nothing like experiencing a steamy malarial jungle, or a swaying suspension bridge, or a yak who's just lost his horn, or a blizzard sent by Kangchenjunga and you're in this icy tent on your own, you can hear your breath, it's dark, you don't know what's on the other side of the canvas... *That's* what brought it alive. One can just tell. When I rewrote it after the trip, it was completely different from the version I had written before. It's not just about getting facts right, it's gave me ideas and brought the thing alive.

## How to avoid getting bogged down in research:

I find I have to do some research (beforehand). I had to do some to choose my mountain: was it going to be in the Andes or the Himalayas? Which mountains? And then reading about the old climbs on Kangchenjunga gave me ideas. You can end up with masses of stuff, and how do you make a choice? And that is always difficult.

***While you're writing, go and do the main research, because that's when you know what you zero-in on, because otherwise you'll waste a lot of time.***

## What can you expect to get from research?

I hope to get surprises. Some of it is just location stuff. If you imagine a mountain, in my mind it's just a sort-of white triangle, but then actually seeing them gives you much better ideas for locations. Tastes and smells. Just surprising things that you didn't expect. Being in that frozen tent, I hadn't realised how scary it can be. One night one of the yaks ran amok through the camp and I was really sleepy, thinking 'Oh, it'll be fine,' and then I thought if one of these things tripped on the ropes and pegs and falls on me I'm going to be dead! And that's a mini-episode in the story. I could not have thought of that. You can't make that up from the internet.

## Michelle's writing tools:

I'm not a technophobe! I have used the internet, y'know, I was using email when I was a lawyer in the City, and that's partly why I don't have it, because it's just such a distraction for me. I even

silence my mobile phone, so I can't hear the ping of a text. My computer is about eighteen years old, and it's Wordperfect 5.1 in DOS, and I save my work to floppy disks. The basic thing is it *works* for me. It's just a tool. I love the computer, but I always write the first draft longhand. It's just that bit freer for me. It's also a question of habit. If something's worked for you, you get a little bit superstitious, so I'm going to stick with it.

## On starting out as a child:

I was five years old. In those days it was typewriters, I would bash them out on my mum's typewriter. I never thought at that time that I wanted to be a writer. Even at school, I didn't think I was going to be a novelist. I didn't think like that. I just wrote school plays and bullied my friends into acting in them. I was at university when I found a Mills & Boon (romance novel) in the library, and I thought 'I can write one of these. Easy. No problem.' I'd never read any. So I bashed out one in three weeks, sent it off, 'Please publish it,' and they sent it back and said 'No.' Quite rightly!

I was the typical arrogant student. I thought 'I've read lots of books, therefore how hard is it?' And that's what started me on the usual thing of trying to write and getting rejected. One of the first books I tried to write was about a boy and a wolf, and I kept it. It didn't get published, it was set in Viking-age Norway.

***So, moral of the story is: keep your old manuscripts. Twenty-three years later, I found something in that, and that became Wolf Brother.***

## Did she ever consider giving up on the writing?

Oh no. It was the other way round. I had tried to write at university, then I became a lawyer, and anyone who works in the City will know, you're working weekends, late nights. I was trying to fit in

the writing. And then it was a question of, after thirteen years, thinking I've got to chuck it in, otherwise I'm not going to get a chance to really have a go at the writing and see if I can do it. So, I just took a deep breath and resigned.

***No regrets. never. Not for a nanosecond. Sorry, any lawyers out there!***

## Michelle's Top Writing Tip:

***At the risk of sounding like an English teacher, rewriting is the most important part of it. Good books aren't written, they're rewritten. Even if you love it, just look a bit critically at it and rewrite until you're really happy with it, and then submit it. And keep writing. I reached a point when I was a lawyer when I was still trying to write, and one weekend I thought no one's going to blame me if I don't write, if I stop, but if I stop writing I will have a one hundred percent certainty that I'm not going to get published. If I keep writing, I've got a tiny, tiny percentage chance of getting published. Does it matter enough to devote all my spare time? And, yes, of course, it did. The thought of having one hundred percent certainty of not getting published was just too ghastly to contemplate. So, if you keep writing, you give yourself a chance.***

# Episode 14: John Connolly -

## There Is No Formula

*John Connolly has won pretty much every crime award going, and his books are regular Sunday Times bestsellers. He is the author of the bestselling Charlie Parker series, which began with Every Dead Thing in 1999. Away from thrillers he has written novellas, YA, ghost stories, and fairy tales for adults, including The Book Of Lost Things, which was celebrating its tenth anniversary with a gorgeous new edition when we spoke to him.*

### Why do some books endure?

To read a book that you love changes you. We've been altered by books that we love, and you're never quite the same person again. For a reader, you need to be unselfish and open to get the real joy out of fiction. There's some thing very elemental and atavistic about fairy tales, even as adults they latch onto something because they deal with things that we're all going to go through: grief, loss and the struggle to move childhood to adulthood, and that's a struggle that keeps on going for adults. When you're a kid you think you're going to get a book of rules at eighteen which explains everything, but what happens is you keep struggling as an adult, you keep encountering new problems and difficulties.

## Empathy vs Sympathy:

I've always felt the purpose of fiction is to find the universal in the specific. To take those things that are individually felt and yet make them understandable, and to have that moment of contact between a writer and a reader, because people don't want sympathy. Sympathy's a very easy response. We say, 'I'm sorry,' if you've experienced a bereavement.

**People want empathy, they want to be understood.**

There are lovely moments, that we as readers of fiction have, where you will pick up a book and you will encounter a phrase or a situation or a reflection by the writer, and you will think *I've always felt that way*. I might never have expressed it in those terms, but it never struck me to look at it from that angle, but I know that thing to be true. And when that happens it's a really extraordinary moment of contact between two individuals who may be separated by time, by gender, by religion, but a moment of commonality where we think we're not alone in this. And maybe there is a consolation in knowing that?

## When is your book ready to go out into the world?

Books are never finished they're just abandoned. It's a bit like throwing your child into the street, saying, 'There y'go, there's ninepence, go and get a job.' I come from a journalist background. I'm very practical. I'm not very keen on 'Wandering lonely as a cloud...' looking for the muse. I sit down and work every day. So, I set myself a deadline. And I've never *not* met my deadline and I've just delivered my twenty-seventh book. All writers need a focus. You can keep changing things. It can

always be improved, but it can be improved into a kind of sterility at some point. It can be overworked. When you're going through it, and you're agonising over commas, and you're making the kind of changes to it that maybe a gnat could spot when learning to read, at that stage it's kind of pointless.

**You learn by finishing things. And you learn by making mistakes.**

And you start getting afraid of making mistakes. We learn very little from success, apart from the fact you can choose to repeat yourself again and again and drive it into the ground.

**Your learning experiences are all from failing. And every book is a failure.**

You will make a set of mistakes in a book, you will think to yourself, 'I don't want to make those mistakes again,' so you will start a new book, and you won't make those same mistakes, you'll make a completely *different* set of mistakes. That is the nature of human endeavour. All human endeavour is flawed. For me, it's very important to finish things. I don't give writers' workshops, because I don't know anything about writing. I know how I write books, which isn't much use to somebody else, but there y'go.

**Every book I've written I've wanted to abandon after twenty-thousand words.**

Every single one of them. I understand that it's a natural part of the process, because we begin all new endeavours with a sense of confidence and enthusiasm. It's a bit like a marriage, you enter a marriage with the best hopes in the world, it's fantastic, look at this woman, she's wonderful, I will never tire of her, we shall gambol through the tulips for the rest of our lives. Enthusiasm only gets you so far. Then you settle into the hard grind of actually living with somebody and the ups and downs that come with it, and a book is a bit like that. You embark on a new project thinking this is

going to be wonderful and it's a fresh idea... and, about twenty-thousand words in, that enthusiasm begins to leech away.

**What happens then for a lot of people is you hear the siren call of the new idea.**

This little voice in your head that says, 'That idea wasn't very good', and if you haven't had the experience of writing and finishing something then what you think is 'That idea wasn't good, this new idea sounds great, so I'll put this one away as a Frankenstein's monster experiment that didn't quite work out, unfinished, and stick it in a drawer and I'll do the other thing.' And twenty thousand words into the new story exactly the same thing happens. You being to set a pattern, which is you leave things unfinished. And when you begin any form of creative life, you're given a finite amount of confidence, and every time you abandon something you chip a little piece of that confidence away, until, finally, you have nothing left at all. And you will never write your book, or your short story, or your poem, or do your painting. So, finish everything! That's why I think it's important for writers to set themselves a deadline. I know that can be hard. Like everyone who's ever started writing, I had another job. So, you're writing in the evenings, or weekends. And there are people who take decades to write their books because of this. Writing needs to become part of your routine. It needs to become something that you do, if not every day, then most days. Whether you get up half an hour earlier and write a hundred words a day, it has to be something you do regularly. You can think that you'll take three weeks off during the summer and write my great Russian novel. You're going to do one day of writing your great Russian novel and then the next three weeks you're drinking gin and watching children's television in your vest.

## Art vs Craft:

If you had Martin Amis or John Banville here, they would be very distrustful of the word 'craft', they dislike it intensely. Everything is 'art'. You don't get to say what's 'art', John and Martin. Time will



decide that, and other people. Art comes out of craft. It comes out of the discipline of sitting down day after day and doing it when you don't feel like doing it, and doing it when you think it's rubbish. Da Vinci's workshop was probably littered with circles that didn't quite work, helicopters that weren't going to fly. You have to embrace the practicality of it. And if you do that, if you go to your desk every day, you will produce work, and you'll have something that you can improve upon.

**A thing abandoned has no place in the world.**

**“It's not hard to write a book. It's hard to write *well*.”**

The ease of publishing is the enemy of good writing. It is now too easy to publish. A book benefits from being put away for a while. A book benefits from being reworked. You can write your first draft, have a quick flick through it, put it through spellcheck, and think 'I'll stick it on for ninety-nine cents, or I'll stick it on for free and let people read it...' It's not *ready* to be read. In the past you would have had to struggle a bit with it. You would have had to save up some money to go to a printer to get it done. It would have taken time, and you would have had to look at proofs, and you would have gone through it with a pencil. There are people who want to stick it on the internet because immediately you'll get twenty comments on it. None of that is good for you as a writer. It's a disaster. Some good books have come out of self-publishing, but as a proportion not many more. It's just harder to find them.

**You can write badly, publish a book, and make a lot of money. There's no formula.**

Each year, one or two books will sell enormous numbers of quantities, completely unexpectedly for both the writer and the publisher. It's the finger of God, as a bookseller friend of mine says.

# The importance of reading:

Writing well comes out of reading well. Oscar Wilde said writers should read more than they will ever write. If people say to me I'm writing but not reading, just in case I'm influenced, you should more or less throw them out of the elevator. Throw them straight out. Don't even wait for the elevator, just drop them off on the floor.

## **We learn write by osmosis.**

You can read as many writing for dummies books as you want, it's really not going to help you be a good writer. What you do is read. Reading bad stuff isn't a bad way, either. With luck you'll spot what's awful about it. That comes from reading good stuff alongside it. And then you practice. Most people who write for a living have always written, because it's their natural response to the world. There are very few people who come to it late in life and succeed.

# Coping with writer's block:

There's no such thing as writer's block. Writer's block is like cancer. It's many different things. The trick to writer's block is you *write* your way out of writer's block. Slow down. Say to yourself, 'I'm going to get a hundred words a day done. And when I get those hundred words a day done, I'm not going to feel guilty. I'm going to put away my notebook or computer. I'm going to play with my kids or take the dog for a walk, I'm going to have a cup of coffee, and then next day I'm going to sit down and do another hundred words. And I'm not going to feel guilty.' That's one way out of it.

The second way out of it is to write something completely different from what you're writing. If you're struggling with a novel, sit down and write a blog post about something that you like. I spent

part of last year writing essays on music, just to give myself a break from juggling two novels, and I was getting tired.

It's similar to muscles and going to the gym. You go to the gym every day and all you do is exercise your arms, you're going to have little, spindly legs that waste away. What you do is balance it out: one day do your arms, another day do your legs, and you alternate them, and that way you keep improving and you don't get tired.

There's no point in saying you're not going to write anything for six months, then you'll never write again. If I take a week off — I used to take time off when I did publicity — and I found that I needed a day to get back into writing for every day I had taken off. So if I did three weeks off to do publicity, I was looking at another three weeks when I got home, just to get back into the rhythm of writing. It's a discipline and a craft. And if you don't use them, they begin to atrophy very, very fast.

## Character first, plot second:

We read for character. Take mystery fiction: by and large, the plots don't change a lot. A guy or girl dies, the detective comes in, there's an investigation, it's solved at the end, we all move on. You can talk to rabid mystery readers and they'll probably be hard-pressed to tell you the plot of a mystery novel that they read a week or a month ago. But they *will* tell you it was a Kay Scarpetta book, it was a Jack Reacher book. And if a writer departs from the character, they won't buy as many copies of the book.

### **Readers want the character.**

Their engagement with a series, the level of affection they have for it, is completely tied-up with the level of affection and engagement they have with the character. They're reading for humanity. They're not reading for the plot. It helps if the plot is good, but if your characters aren't good then the plot isn't going to save you. Right from the beginning, everything began with character. Why

would you read a book with cardboard characters? Sometimes there's pleasure in reading something that's pretty undemanding, but you don't want to read that all the time. If your kid wants to eat pizza — I like to eat pizza — but occasionally force a strawberry in his mouth.

## Did he develop Charlie Parker's character much before writing?

I don't believe in that. It's the sort of thing they tell you to do in writing class, to take out a piece of paper and describe your character's hair, and his suit and his blue eyes... The real truth is, if you asked writers what their characters look like they'll tell you, 'He looks like me, except maybe two stone lighter and six inches taller.'

If people are struggling, or it's kids trying to write book, I would say to them let's do a sheet of paper that describes your character. But if that's the level that you have to get down to you've really hit a problem as a writer... but, like I said to you earlier, I only know how I can write. I know one mystery writer who can't start a book until he has the title. I know people who will write tens of thousands of words as an outline before they start a book, and will very much swear to the importance of sitting down and saying this character has this background, is this tall, has blue eyes...

**All that matters in the end is if at the end of the process you produce a book, or a short story, a poem, or a play, that's *completed*, then *that* is the way that you write.**

You do so through a process of trial and error. If you start with character, then quite naturally a progression occurs. Certainly, that's been the case for me. In part, with Charlie Parker, the central character of my mystery novels, I've let him grow old as I grow old. The concerns that he has, the

nature of his own physicality has altered, his emotional life has changed, so he hasn't remained fixed.

**Ultimately we all draw on our own experiences to create characters.**

Writing fiction is a bit like dreaming. They say you're everybody in your dreams, you're putting aspects of yourself into them, and you do the same thing with fiction. You put a little bit of yourself into every character that you write.

**I've given every sin I've ever committed to someone in a book.**

Every fault or failing I've had, I've put into someone else. And it gives them a kind of humanity. I'm not interested in creating monsters. I want them to be understandable. That's how I give life to characters. I think, well I know this to be true, because I've experienced it. Either directly, or through somebody around me. I know that readers, even if they haven't gone through these things, I hope they will sense a certain truth to it. There isn't a formula. This is why I'm so distrustful of writing workshops that try to break things down in that way. You can help people with the process. That's *all* you can do. You can help them over those moments where they're going to lose confidence. You can say, yes this is part of the process, this is what happens, and you should understand it, and these are the ways you can tackle it, but every writer will find his or her own way through the thicket. And, ultimately, the only way to do that is to write, and to discover the kind of writer that you are. But we're all in such a hurry to be published, and we're all such a hurry to make our millions and buy our yacht and our house in the country and our sailing pants, that we're not actually prepared to give ourselves the time. I've been practising writing for a very long time. Not to discourage people who want to write, but I'm telling you it will be commensurately more difficult if I were to sit down at my age, 48, and say 'I'm going to be a writer now.' That would be very, very hard. As you get older you do begin to concretise a little bit. You do begin to set. And it gets harder

to shake up the things in our lives. So, it's not to dissuade people, if you're older and you want to write, you're going to have to give yourself a crash course, you're going to have to read a hell of a lot, and you're going to have to practice writing. And you're going to have to do all that without any hope of reward. And you don't want to be putting your first short story on the internet for ninety-nine cents. Don't do that.

**Write. Make mistakes. Take the time to learn what you want to be.**

The question you need to ask yourself is why? Why do you want to do this? If you want to do it to make money, then you should probably stop now. The law of averages says you won't make any money at all. Even people who are published, by large publishing houses, published every couple of years... what was the median income for writers last year? About fourteen thousand pounds? You're going to be driving a bus, or being an accountant, and that will fund your writing life. If you're doing this because this is your way to explore your consciousness, and the consciousness of others, and to give yourself an artistic and creative outlet, which is ultimately to improve yourself as a human being, then that's a good reason to write. And therefore, you will sit down, and you will make mistakes, and you will join a writing group, read your stuff out, and people will critique your work, and you'll go back and think about it. And years may go by. And that's the process that you have to set in train. The world is not going to be poorer for people writing books. You're not starting wars. But it's worth taking a breath and asking yourself why you want to do this. That will determine a) the kind of writer you want to become, and b) the happiness and joy that you take out of it.

## John's Final Word:

***Never underestimate the power of a chip on your shoulder. I've been told by my father that people like us don't become writers, we work for the council. When I worked for the Irish Times I was told I'd be an okay hack in the end. Never underestimate the power of proving***

*people wrong. I'd like to say something more positive than that, but contented people never really do anything. In my creative life, contentment is the enemy of all things. Prove people wrong. Prove that you can be a writer.*

# Episode 15: Mark Huckerby & Nick Ostler - Peter Rabbit vs Werewolves

*Huckerby and Ostler have written hundreds of episodes of TV shows such as Danger Mouse, Thunderbirds Are Go!, Peter Rabbit and Shaun The Sheep, as well as writing horror movies such as Howl and Don't Knock Twice. Emmy winners and BAFTA-nominated, they are one of the most successful writing partnerships around, and with their new children's book, Defender Of The Realm, they've created what is destined to become a bestselling adventure series...*

## How did they first meet?

Mark Huckerby: This is a true story. Nick and I met on the very first day of university. We went to Nottingham University in about 1992, and we were queueing up for a registration and I turned round to this guy behind me and said something like, 'Bit of a long queue,' or something, and it was Nick, and he completely blanked me. I thought, 'What a dick!'

Nick Ostler : I just didn't like the look of him.

Mark: And it turned out that Nick was the only guy there whose dad was in the queue with him.



Nick: I was mortally embarrassed. I had never been away from home before. Mark was slightly older and wiser and streetwise than me, and I was panicking I think. I thought if I don't talk to anyone I won't have to introduce my dad. I just pretended I hadn't heard him and he thought I was really unfriendly.

Mark: We didn't speak for a term, and then I heard Nick was writing plays, and I was acting at the time, and there was another guy there called Dan Chambers.

Nick: I saw them dick around with each other. They used to do something where they would be in the main room watching Neighbours, and Mark and Dan would pretend to have a fight in front of the TV at a really crucial bit just to make everyone laugh and piss them off, and I thought this was really funny and just assumed that they were really good at doing comedy acting, so I approached them and it turned out that they had actually done a bit of acting. So I cast them in the plays I was writing. To cut a long story short, we started writing together, we did our version of the Footlights, we did comedy sketch shows that we would put on in the theatre, much to the annoyance of the really serious English Lit grads who wanted to do Ibsen and stuff like that, and we would come on and do our stupid sketches in lycra pants. We managed to con our way into getting sent to the Edinburgh Festival. I infiltrated the committee and managed to rig the election so that we got in under the wire to get some money - a few hundred quid - so we could go to Edinburgh.

Mark: It was a committee of forty people, and Nick got a job as the fire safety officer.

Nick: My only job was to buy a single fire extinguisher, something that I failed to do in two years.

## How they started writing together:

Mark: We started sketch writing together on notepads and a really basic word processor.

Nick: We did a lot of student radio, as well. A weekly show. It became a good discipline of writing comedy sketches quickly and performing them and seeing what worked and what didn't work. Most of it was probably rubbish, I think enough of it was okay, and we gradually got better, and that's where we made our first contact at the Edinburgh Festival with a BBC Light Entertainment radio producer. He sent us a letter afterwards, and we thought we'd made it.

## On Breaking Through:

Nick: What it boiled down to was we had a meeting with him in London, while doing other jobs that we hated, but it eventually led to us getting some non-commissioned work on Radio 4, and we started getting more and more stuff used. Eventually a producer said to us that if we were full-time doing this then we would get a lot more work, so we casually jacked-in our jobs and attempted to make a living. A couple more breaks happened and then we ended-up writing on some animation shows. We did a few sketch shows along the way, but we wanted to write more narrative stuff. We liked doing the longer form. When we got an opportunity to do animated scripts for TV, which were seven minutes scripts, or eleven minute scripts, we really enjoyed that and accidentally fell into that as a bit of a niche. Animation is one of those worlds in the industry where everyone knows each other and if you get stuff used on a show then your name gets around, and that was more our break, segueing into that area, which we still do a lot of now.

## Were they also writing screenplays during this period?

Nick: That came a bit later. We built up to it, which was quite a good way of doing it. We started doing seven minutes, then eleven minute sketches, then some twenty-two minute shows. By the

time we decided to do a feature — not that our first one was any good — but we built up to it. We didn't dive straight into doing a ninety minute script, which is different beast and much harder.

Mark: It always surprises me when you hear people say that they're going to start straight in with a feature. I remember, just post-university when we were working for Radio 4, how hard it was just to write a decent two minute sketch. Gradually we started expanding that out, so I did feel that when we came to write the feature scripts that we were ready to do that. There was very long lead up to be ready to do screenplays.

Nick: We did a bunch of screenplays — plenty that haven't been made — but luckily we got a couple of low-budget horror films made, one of which was out last year, and another is going to be out in 2017. It's a coincidence really that it's the horror ones that got made. I think at the time we were doing them those were the kind of films at that budget level that could get made.

***We have a bit of a weird CV. We were writing Peter Rabbit at the same time as a werewolf movie.***

## The link between horror and children's stories:

Nick: When we were approached for Peter Rabbit we hadn't done pre-school stories before, and we more comfortable doing comedy-adventure for slightly older kids, and we didn't think it was for us, and we resisted it for a while, but then we looked at the source material and of course it was very red in tooth and claw, and basically about a thieving rabbit, and a fox and a farmer who're constantly trying to kill him, and we thought that if you can put that jeopardy in there, it would both be faithful to the source material and it would make it more exciting, so we wrote an action-adventure comedy show, that happened to be based on this hundred-year-old property, and we

were given free-reign to try what we wanted to do, and luckily they really liked it and it was the take that they were looking for. Kids like to be scared and they like horror in a safe way.

***I think there are more parallels between horror and comedy. It's said that a laugh and a scream are the same release of tension.***

I think that's why when we were getting to know each other at university, we were watching movies like *The Evil Dead*, which was perfect. It was scary, supernatural and really funny. They do crossover, so maybe it's not as weird a CV as it sounds.

## What is it like writing as a team?

Mark: I have immense respect for writers who write on their own. I can't really imagine doing that. It's such a solitary profession where you're alone with your thoughts for long periods of time, and I've never really had that. I've always worked in a group, whether it was with Nick or Dan at university, it was always the three of feeding back on what we were writing.

***The big advantage that you have with a partnership that's grown naturally is that we're always feeding back, we're always really honest with each other on we think about each other's scripts and work, and it's not even a big deal anymore to say what we think about something.***

We're very good at taking notes when we're working on the TV stuff with producers, and it's just no big deal for us to get notes on our scripts because we've been doing it for a long period of time. I know that sometimes for writers that are on their own getting script notes can be such an arduous trauma. It always is when you get your work critiqued, but maybe we're more used to that and robust in our attitude to that.

And it's kind of like having a boss. I know what Nick's working on, he knows what I'm working on, you've always got something to aim for at the end of the day — the end of a chapter or the end of a script — in order to exchange it, so you have that nice time pressure.

Nick: There's a certain mystique about writing partnerships, which I think does give you an advantage in dealing with other people in the industry and producers and directors, because you've got this slightly mysterious thing that no one quite knows what goes on between you in that creative space, and it gives you a bit more power in the equation. It definitely makes a difference with two of you going into a meeting. You're less likely to be outnumbered, you're more likely to pick up the slack and back each other up, and I think it does help you in the room, which is a big part when you're collaborating on film and TV, and books as well. There is safety in numbers.

Mark: Nick and I have developed what we call the Hive Mind. I know what Nick's thinking, he knows what I'm thinking, we often just react in the same way to notes. It's definitely an advantage. I prefer going in with Nick than on my own.

Nick: And I can *find* the meeting, because I have a terrible sense of direction, so I tend to follow Mark around Soho, about two paces behind him, and then we get there. I think our partnership works. We've been together for over twenty years and most of that professionally. I think it survives because we were friends first, and also because we're quite similar in many ways, not in every way, but generally speaking our tastes are quite similar. We like the same kind of stuff, we like writing the same sort of things, we tend to think the same about people and situations, so we don't really argue, which I think is actually important. A lot of people think partnerships only work if it's like chalk and cheese and you're both completely complementary, and we've met partnerships like that before and they don't tend to survive in my experience, because it's just exhausting. We joke that it's our first marriage, we've been working together longer than each of us have been married to our wives, and it doesn't last if you're fighting all the time, and you're pulling in opposite

directions. I think a lot of it also comes down to personalities just clicking, in a way that's not too confrontational, but where you're able to be honest to one another.

## What do you do when you're both trying convince each other about something?

Nick: Well, I just get my way... It generally doesn't happen that much. It sounds terribly boring. We're not pushovers. We do have disagreements and different ideas, but we have to resolve them, but those genuinely don't last very long, we don't have big blubs. I don't think either of us are so stubborn that we won't listen to reason or coherent notes from the other.

Mark: If that ever does come up then the other person will say 'We'll give it a go. Convince me.' And that will often lead to new ideas, if it's not that thing then it will lead to something else, and you'll work it up together from there. I think that's the way to deal with that. If you've got an idea and you feel very passionate about it, then have a go at it and see if you can make it work.

Nick: It can also depend on what you're working on. There's a practical aspect to it, that we're working on different projects at once, and most days we're going to be working on different things. They might be different chapters of the same book or I might be writing a Danger Mouse script, and Mark's writing a script for another show, so we might each be heading-up a particular script, so if you're the one heading-it up then you kind-of have more of a say over it, and the other one, depending on how busy we are, might not. We get eyes on everything. There's nothing that goes in that both haven't looked at, but it often — and this again is a trade secret, we wouldn't tell this to producers we're working with — but it might be that a script you're getting is ninety-five percent written by one of us. In that sense we're a bit of a company, so everything goes out with our names and brand on it, but within that there's a whole range of ways that we manage the workload.

Obviously, if it's something like the book, or a feature film, then we're going to be working much closer together the whole time on it. But if we're working three different shows at once, then inevitably you're going to split work up to be practical.

## How much of a culture shock was writing a novel?

Mark: I just hadn't really thought about it when we got our deal with Scholastic, and we pitched the book, and we were ready to write it. Then there was that moment when we started to write it, it was a bit like... Can we do this? It reminded me of the first time we went on stage at Nottingham University when we were acting together, I remember just before we went on the first night, one of us turned to the other and said, 'How do we know this is funny?' None of us had thought, 'Maybe we're not funny?' I guess we were confident with it, and with the book we thought we'll approach as we do our screenplays. We did a lot of outlining, prior to writing, we sat down and talked for weeks and weeks about it, and then we divided it up and I took the first two chapters to have a bit of run-in, Nick took three and four and then we switched over, and then there was that moment of truth, 'What's it going to be like to see Nick's prose writing?' as opposed to his screenwriting. And he had the same with me. Weirdly, when we compared our two samples of prose writing in the first tranches of the novel that we wrote, they were really, really similar. It was that weird thing of working together for so long that, without knowing it, we had developed a prose style. Which was based on a prose style that we used in the screenplays.

Nick: It was also because we realised that, as a screenwriter, in the hoops you have to jump through to get to a script, you have to write treatments. And those are prose documents of one, two, three, four, ten, fifteen pages or more, before you get to do the script. And we learnt in the early days that it wasn't enough for those to be functional, structural documents. They've got to be entertaining. If they're not page-turners, the execs are going to get bored, and not be interested. And that's fair enough.

***If you're proposing to write a comedy film, your treatment for it better be funny, and if you're going to write a horror film your treatment better be scary.***

We hadn't realised, but we had actually learnt a bit of a house style writing these treatments over the years, which is what we brought to the writing. When we showed our sample chapters to our agent, she said 'I can't tell who wrote which bit first,' which was a big relief, and we probably hadn't thought about it as much as we should have done.

And we do rewrite each other's pages. It's not like we can say this chapter's written by me, this chapter's written by Mark. We might be able to remember who did the first draft, but they've gone through a lot of editing by both of us over months and years. It's all in the outlining. We did that the same way we do a feature script, and then we do a really detailed chapter outline. When we presented the outline for the second book to our publishers, we'd done a twenty-five page outline, and one of the editors let slip that 'Writers never do this.' I guess it's from necessity, but I also don't know how you'd do it without one.

## How did Defender Of The Realm come about?

Mark: It was Nick's original idea: what if the King or Queen of England was a secret superhero? And we were deciding how to deal with that: was it a film? Was it TV? We originally optioned it to Tiger Aspect as a TV idea, but that was way too early in the process, and we got it back after a year, and we thought 'Y'know what? This is a book.' And we started to think of it as a book and then from then on that's how we pursued it. We were talking to various publishers about it and we originally wrote eight chapters, and we thought that's enough to sell it, and we had the whole idea, we knew how it was going to end, and we were really happy with it, and we'll send this in to publishers and see what they thought. And we went to Penguin and Scholastic and various places



and everywhere we sent it to said, 'Yeah, we like the idea, we can see where it's going, but we don't buy partial books.' And we were like, '*What?*'

Nick: We were lucky at the time, though, We had a good writing job in TV, so we were okay for money, so we didn't need to be paid to do it. It was more just finding the time to do it in between that. We were disciplined in wrestling a free day here or there where we could push it on. And then within that year we got to the end of it.

## What are the practicalities behind writing together?

Nick: We're very basic on that. We just keep files on a Dropbox for our projects. We don't have of those live collabowrite things. I think we tried one once, but it was a bit of a pain. For example, the book will be in chapter files for most of its life, up to the point where we're ready to compile it and send it in, so that we can work on different chapters independently.

People are probably imagining that we're in the same room, walking around behind the other one typing, which is how we spent our first couple of years writing, but these days we don't live in the same county, even. So we're in our own offices, and we do rely on this technology to do it remotely.

## What happens when you get stuck?

Nick: That's just the day-to-day grind, isn't it? We don't believe in writer's block. If you give it a name like that, it suddenly becomes this thing that is out of your control.

***The clichés are true: you just need to treat it as a job. A surgeon can't say that he's got surgeon's block. You just have to do it.***

You learn techniques and ways of attacking problems, and there are plenty of books that can help you with that. It's mainly the thing that, as Mark said, there's two of us. If you're feeling there's a problem, you've got someone to talk to till you've solved it. I think it would be much harder by yourself.

Mark: Today I hit a problem with a script, and it's a complete luxury to send it to Nick and say can you have a look at this, there's something wrong with the middle section of this script, and sure enough a bunch of notes came back which unblocked the drain. Sometimes just walking the dog helps. It's just great to get out of the house. Having said that I found it very hard to write two minute sketches when I first started writing, it was very hard to concentrate and sit down and do that, I've now worked up to the point where I could sit very happily at my desk for seven hours a day, which is not healthy, to do writing. And if I ever do hit those kind of blocks, then it's great to get out and walk on it, and it's the bit that everyone laughs at; 'Oh, writers... sounds like an excuse for a walk.' But, actually, when you let your brain just kind of relax a bit and you just get those surprising, subconscious thoughts come through, that always comes on a walk for me. You don't even know you're thinking about the problem and you come back and sit back at the desk afresh and suddenly there's a new angle and new light shone on the problem.

Nick: That's why it's good to have multiple projects on the go as well, because if you're really not feeling it on one project one day, then you can hop onto something else. You've always got something useful to be doing. I think you need to have a healthy lack of sympathy with writers who complain about not feeling the mood to do it today, or the muse. Get over yourself and get on with it. It's just hard work, y'know? It's not supposed to be a glamorous, exciting thing all the time, it's just like anyone else's job.

***Mark: Hammer the keys!***

Nick: Sometimes it's just hard work and you've just got to get on with it.

Mark: Make your forehead bleed. Who said that? Was it Richard Curtis? Writing's about staring at a sheet of paper until your forehead bleeds. That's just what it is. Some days it's brilliant. You can always write something, even if you end up scrapping it. There will be something you will build on and use.

Nick: And even if you're dog-tired — I've got a couple of young kids — there are days when you haven't had any sleep. You can do something. You can go through an outline and you can put the sluglines in. Just a mechanical, boring thing that has to be done at some point. You can do some formatting, or your title page, and by the time you've done that, you've actually read through it a couple of times and then you have an idea. Sometimes it's just one word at a time.

## Having been published, would you do anything different?

Nick: It was brilliant. Almost in every way it was a more enjoyable experience than scriptwriting and trying to get scripts made, I think. We were taken aback by how much creative control you have, how few voices there are in the room... Not that that's always a bad thing, but when it's your idea and your book, it's treated completely as your baby, and the responsibility is on you in the end, and that's what it's going to be forever in that book, and there's a pressure in a way, you've got no excuse. You can't say, 'Oh, the director didn't understand it, or they didn't have the budget to do this bit,' so it's more nerve-racking in some ways, but at the stage that our careers are at it was just what we needed, and it was fantastic, and it felt completely ours, in a way that no other project

ever had. And we were very proud of it and there were the nerves of it getting published and getting nice feedback and reviews was like, 'Wow, people are enjoying it!'

***For me, it was the single most satisfying creative end result that we've ever had.***

# **Episode 16: Federica Leonardis & Sonya Lalli - How Do I Get An Agent?**

*One of the most common questions asked by new writers is ‘How can I get an agent?’ We thought it would be fun to get an agent and a debut author in to discuss exactly that, and it was fascinating, funny and revealed some great tips.*

*Federica Leonardis is founder of Martin Leonardis Literary Management. She has worked with agents such as Ed Victor, in publishing at the Orion Publishing Group, and more recently at Rogers, Coleridge & White Literary Agency, with authors such as Victoria Hislop, Ian Rankin, David Starkey and Joanne Harris, before taking the plunge and starting her own agency.*

*Sonya Lalli is a Canadian writer of Indian heritage, who studied law in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and Columbia University in New York. She completed an MA in Creative Writing and Publishing at City University, London, and her debut novel *The Arrangement* will be published in the summer of 2017.*

## Let's get straight to the point: how do we get an agent?

Federica: Can you write? If you can, then yes, you can get an agent, but you have to get the *right* agent. It is a bit like dating. You might be lucky and fall in love at first sight, or you might have to kiss a few frogs before you find the right one. I absolutely recommend making sure that you get the right agent for you. There's a misconception that any agent will do — an agent is an agent — but an author has to find somebody who can share their vision for the book, can see the book going in the same direction, can see your career direction. That's very, very important, otherwise it's a recipe for disaster.

## How did Sonya know that Federica was the right agent for her?

Sonya: I didn't. Like any good dater, you have to be a little bit sceptical at first. I'd had my heart broken before. I think I knew when Federica and I first went for lunch, and she was talking about how much she enjoyed the book, where she saw there was room to grow, what I needed to work on. And she brought up my favourite book, *Me Before You* by JoJo Moyes, and said that this is the book she thought about. That was the book that I had kept by my desk when I was writing *The Arrangement*. And I thought, if she's thinking about the exact same thing, then this has to be it.

Federica: I remember that lunch. I was very excited, and very, very nervous. I was excited because Sonya's novel got to me via the anthology of the MA she attended, the university sent out the anthology and I saw her extract and loved the idea immediately, and I loved her biography, so

natural, so *her*. It just spoke to me. I emailed her and asked for the full manuscript. Loved the themes, loved the writing, loved the humour behind it. And so we had lunch. I think I came across as a slightly over-enthusiastic puppy, 'Can I represent you? Can I? Can I? Can I?' But, I have to say, I put her through a series of gruelling rewrites and edits, and it must have been really hard for her to keep the faith. I was telling her to change this, move this, make more of this, less of that, and she did it all.

## What was it like being put through the wringer by your agent?

Sonya: It was good that I had gone back to work. I was working in London in an office, five minutes away from Federica's old office, and so I did have other things to focus on. I didn't know that many people (in London) so I couldn't really do anything but write. It was good because everything she suggested was in line with what I wanted the book to accomplish, and I think I had to learn as we went. I had made-up a story, but I'm not a publishing person, I'm not an editor, I'm not a marketer, I couldn't make a book on my own, so I had to let go of a lot and trust her, and now that I'm with Orion, trust them to do what's best, because I'm not a publisher.

Federica: That's the most difficult thing, when they say 'Kill your darlings.' You have to learn to let go of your story. You write at least three drafts; one is for yourself, one is for your reader, and one is for your agent.

**Draft after draft you have to learn to let go of the things that don't serve you.**

I can imagine that, as a writer, that must be really difficult. There might be things you get very attached to, but if it doesn't move your story forward, you have to learn to let go. I can't imagine how hard that must be when you've poured your heart and soul into it.

## Did Sonya's MA course cover things like getting an agent?

Sonya: Yes. I did an MA that was focused on both creative writing and publishing. I learned a lot about the publishing process through that, then again because my focus was to write a book and not to work in the publishing industry, I couldn't dwell on that stuff too much.

**You can get carried away thinking about the future and thinking about things that haven't happened yet, before you actually finish the book.**

I remember, I bought The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook, and I think I was only halfway through my novel at that point, and I forced myself to set it aside and not actually read it.

## Would Federica still recommend that writers looking for an agent start with the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook?

Federica: Yes, it's one of the first things I would recommend. Another very useful thing to do is to go through your favourite novels, or novels in the same genre that you're writing, and read the



acknowledgements and see who the agent and editor is. That's something I do when I want to see who edited a book, and you have to collect a few and start with those.

## What are the common mistakes people make when submitting to agents?

Federica: The cardinal sin when submitting to an agent is not reading the submission guidelines. The second cardinal sin is being rude, or over-familiar. And the third is trying too hard. It is exactly like asking somebody on a date. How do you open? Do you open with a joke? A compliment? Do you go for the hard sell? Everyone's got a style or a technique. Don't second-guess yourself, or the agent. You don't know the agent you're emailing. You know what they represent, but you don't know who they are.

## What were Sonya's first submission letters like?

Sonya: I don't want to read them. I have them somewhere on my computer. I think that I took the approach where I tried to sound like I was applying for a job. I don't know if that's a good technique or not, again I didn't submit to Federica, I just got rejected by loads of other agents, and it was the best thing that could have happened.

Federica: I think, because you don't know the agent personally, I would always recommend: be polite, double-check spelling of names, tell me what your novel is about. I know you're emailing me because you want me to represent you, so there's no need to say that, that's all I need to know.

Does it help to say in the letter why the writer is approaching you specifically?

Federica: The only criteria is whether I like the book and I think I can sell it.

What's a bad example of a submission letter? The kind of thing you really shouldn't say.

Federica: I happen to have here an example. This is on the extreme end of the spectrum. And it was a blanket submission, which is when someone submits to every agent in an agency. And we discovered that this person submitted to every agent in every agency in *London*. Possibly in the U.S., as well...

"EVERYBODY IS WAITING FOR MY BOOK. IN MANY COUNTRIES. I PROMISE YOU, IF YOU DON'T REPRESENT MY BOOKS AND GET ME A PUBLISHING DEAL I WOULD DIE ALONE RIGHT NOW, YOU WILL HAVE TO REPRESENT ME. PLEASE DON'T WASTE MY TIME. I'VE BEEN WRITING FOR OVER FOUR YEARS, PLEASE DON'T TEST MY PATIENCE, AS I DON'T HAVE MUCH OF OTHER THINGS WITH ME. I COULD BE YOUR NEW CLIENT. LEAST PUT ME ON YOUR LONGLIST. HOPE YOU CAN DO THAT. YOU WILL HAVE TO REPRESENT ME. YOU HAVE NO CHOICE. RIGHT NOW, I WANT A PUBLISHER. PLEASE DON'T TEST MY PATIENCE. DON'T WASTE MY TIME. I CAN BE ALL YOURS. WITH THE HELP OF MY LOVING READERS, I WILL CRUSH MY HATERS LIKE A MEATBALL IN MOUTH. ONCE I GET OLD I WILL REALLY NOT BE ABLE TO WRITE BOOKS, THEN I'M GOING TO DIE ALONE AND YOU WILL BE CURSED. THERE ARE MORE WHO ARE NOT SHOWING IT OPENLY, BUT DEEP INSIDE THEY

WANT TO WORK WITH ME. THEY ARE JUST UNDER PRESSURE FROM A FEW JERKS THAT WANT TO PRESS ME.”

Federica: So this person goes on for three more pages, and sent other emails, adding to the original email. This is a very good example of what *not* to do. The person called, several times. We got very confrontational calls. Calling is a big no-no. There are a couple of things that people outside of publishing don’t necessarily understand, and there’s no reason why they should know. We don’t make money reading the slush pile (the slush pile is an industry term for unsolicited submissions), so they are our lowest priority. Our priority is always our existing clients. There are writers who call saying ‘I sent you a submission a week ago, why haven’t you read it yet?’

If something is on the slush pile, how long can  
someone expect to wait for a reply?

Federica: Usually an agent’s submission guidelines will give you an idea. On my website I say eight weeks. I try my best to respond quicker than that.

Sonya: I’ve been there and I definitely empathise with writers who are currently looking for an agent and how that waiting game can be. My phone died very quickly every day, because I was constantly refreshing my emails. It tested my patience, it made me grow a lot, in the sense that I realised you can’t always have what you want. Things don’t actually always work out the way that you hope. I was just starting work again, so I had that to distract me. I tried meditation. I don’t know if I’m old enough for meditation yet.

**I tried to be aware that there was nothing in this moment that I could change.**

Some agent somewhere at some point might be reading my submission, but I have no control over that. And all I can do right now is do my own thing; starting another book, revising my current manuscript. Focus on that. Focus on what you can control.

## Deep down did you have a belief that this was going to happen?

Sonya: I think I had that belief in a very naive way. I had that before I moved to London and did the MA and realised what publishing and writing actually meant. I just had to keep up with that habit of writing and learning as much as I could. You have to have faith in yourself.

Federica: This is a topic that I think about a lot, because both a writer's life and an agent's life are lives of rejection. That's pure and simple. You have to find a way of coping with rejection. To *not* let rejection define you. Find a way of moving on. If you can't cope with rejection, you can't play this game.

## How do you break it to an author that they've been rejected?

First of all, there are many, many reasons why a publisher might turn down a book. Very often the reasons have nothing to do with the book itself, with the quality. It could be that they have something similar on the list, or that they simply didn't connect with the story. This is an industry based on personal opinions and personal tastes. What I remember saying to Sonya, when I started submissions of her book, is forget about this. It's going to be much harder for you than it is for me. I

can do something about it. I can call editors, I can work on the pitch, find other editors. I said, start writing another book.

## And did you?

Sonya: No (laughs). I listen to Federica most of the time, but I thought about it constantly. I couldn't control myself. But I was lucky in that I was back in Saskatoon, visiting my family, and so I had a lot of good distractions.

## How did it work with Federica after your first meeting?

Sonya: Federica says she came over like a desperate puppy, but I remember her playing hard-to-get. We met for lunch, she said that she had some suggestions for me, and what did I think about them. A few weeks later she sent me a marked-up copy of the manuscript, and then I went through that and there were a few changes. It was hard. You never want to be told that something isn't good enough, but I knew that she believed in me and for a couple of months, in evenings and at weekends, I worked on that and then after Federica saw that new version of the manuscript, and it was going in the right direction, she made me an offer. And I couldn't refuse.

Federica: I was definitely an over-enthusiastic puppy, but I tried to over-compensate because I try to put myself in a writer's position. They've probably had rejections, and somebody saying 'I like your novel,' is really a light in the dark. But I want her to make an informed decision. I want her to know what I thought she needed to do in order to make the novel marketable. I didn't want her to jump into a decision. A very important element for me is to know whether an author can listen. I know she can write, but can she listen? And did she agree with my vision of the book? My edit?

That's very important. She could have said I don't like the direction you want to take this book, and that would have been fine... I would have been very sad.

## What are the other jobs an agent does, apart from pitching a book?

Federica: Editor, therapist, publicist, contract manager, royalty manager, life coach, matchmaker, sales manager. You're an editor before you sell it to a publisher, and after that you have to let it go. You have to be honest and you have to be humble. My edits are suggestions and I would much rather it become a discussion, and a collaboration. Nobody knows her novel better than Sonya does. If I had to pick one, I think Life Coach would be my favourite role.

## Does a book agent also negotiate the movie rights for a book?

Yes, either directly or with the help of a TV agent.

## What are the top three reasons why a book is rejected by a publisher?

Federica:

- They have a similar title in the pipeline, or they have a full list.
- An editor doesn't respond to the subject matter in the book.
- The most common one is they like it, but they don't love it.

Federica: Editors are human, they see trends. A few years ago Victorian novels were everywhere, and they might like your Victorian novel, but they might decide not to buy it because that's not where the market is going.

## How do you sway an author from their set beliefs if you feel the book's unmarketable?

Federica: Is it a bad book? If so, I will try to dissuade the author from publishing it, and get her or him to write something else. If they insist, then that might be a reason for going our separate ways. If it's a difficult book — so, if it's a good book, that breaks trends, or is something completely new — I will make it very clear to the author that it's going to be a hard sell. Then we can decide

together. It depends on what stage they are at in their career; they may have made a name for themselves. Is it just a detour, or is it a completely different direction that they want to take their career on? All that matters is, is the book any good or not?

## How much does an agent charge?

Federica: It's a percentage: between 15-20%.

In music, if you have a manager they deal with all the money that comes in, they take their commission and then pay you what's left. Is that how it works with a book agent, too?

Federica: Yes.

If an author drops an agent, does that agent still earn the income from the books that they have published with them?

Federica: Yes.



How chunky is an agent's contract? Is it a fifty-page document that you have to show a lawyer?

Federica: It's a couple of pages. There's no exchange of money, and there's no exchange of rights. She's not granting me any rights. It's just a collaboration agreement.

And would that agreement specify x books or x timeframe?

Federica: No. When you take an author on it's with the intent of looking after their writing and career long-term. I don't think I could take somebody on just for a book. I need to be committed to them and their writing and I would need them to be committed to their writing and to me. There are agent-author relationships that last longer than marriages.

Is an agent also a deadline-maker for the author?

Federica: No. I would like my authors to feel responsible for their own manuscript. I can't be their nanny. And I don't want to be. This is a collaboration. If you want to be a writer, you write without me looming over you. Obviously, if a contract is in place, then that's slightly different, because you have a contractual responsibility, so I might become a bit more naggy, but I don't have this problem with Sonya whatsoever. She's possibly one of the few authors who delivers early.

And, for one week only, Federica did our motivational minute...

*If you're serious about your writing, take yourself seriously. You wouldn't operate on somebody having just done an evening course, so why would you think you could be published writing here and there in your spare time? Take yourself seriously. Write every day. No excuses. Take yourself seriously.*

*Writers compare their first draft to somebody's published novel. We compare our behind the scenes self to somebody else's stage persona. Why would we do that? Why would you compare your crappy first draft, to Stephen King's hundred and fiftieth novel? Something that's gone through three or four drafts, an edit, a copy edit, proof-reading... it doesn't make sense.*

*The first million words you write will be rubbish. The sooner you start writing, the sooner you'll hit a million words, and get better.*

# Episode 17: The Triumphant Return Of Shannon Mayer - Hybrid Authors, Intent & Collaboration

*In the second part of our interview with bestselling indie author Shannon Mayer, we talk about her new deal with Amazon, discover what a hybrid author is, we discuss the importance of an author's intent, being business-like and working in collaboration with other writers.*

## What the hell is a hybrid author?

When an indie author goes from being published by themselves into a traditional publishing contract they're considered a 'hybrid', and that means they're still an independent author, but with a contract with a traditional publisher or company. Amazon has their own set of imprints, and I signed with 47 North, their science fiction and fantasy imprint. I was approached by one of their acquisitions editors, and we had a long discussion about me working with them and I went down to Seattle and had a face-to-face chat with her, which was fantastic. I pitched an idea I had brewing and they said yes, write it, and let's move forward. We signed a three book deal and the first book,

Venom and Vanilla, is out now. It's been a really interesting experience to publish with them, because the last few years I've been independent, which means I take care of everything; editing, cover art, formatting, marketing, and so it's been really different to have a whole new team on those things with me.

Was this part of a bigger plan, or a great opportunity that came along because of her success?

I don't know that I *planned* it. I look at this as a business. As with every business you don't really want to put your eggs all in one basket. As an independent author I have a lot of opportunities to make decisions in terms of my career, but that doesn't mean that there aren't other opportunities out there. Going hybrid allows me the opportunity to work with the Amazon team and learn from them things that I can then apply to my independent publishing. And, being Amazon, they're a marketing genius company, and to have that behind my books I can reach new markets and new readers that I could not have done so on my own.

Did she take her editor with her, or did Amazon introduce her to a new editor?

Based on what they saw of my writing, they found me an editor they thought would be a good match. I was open to that, I feel like every editor has a different viewpoint and can teach you as an author, and I was really excited to work with somebody new. And she pushed in me in different ways to the editors I use now, and so I feel I grew as a writer by working with them.

## Is it true you delivered the trilogy early?

Because my own schedule is so tight, and I write as much as I do, I wanted to have the books written, and on their table, and off my desk as soon as I was able to. I had all the books delivered a couple of weeks ahead of the deadline, and, in one case, about a month and a half early, so that I could continue on with my own works. It was the same thing with their edits. They gave me a great amount of time to work on edits — 2-3 weeks — which is phenomenal, but I don't have time to take 2-3 weeks! So I had pretty quick turnarounds. They were pleased with that.

## You must hear people saying 'You can't make money selling books'. How do you respond to that?

That's a hard one for me. I still attend conferences when I can, because I still feel there's always something to learn. The hard part is that most of those conferences are geared towards traditional publishing. There's nothing wrong with that, but there's a certain mindset that there isn't a lot of money to be made in writing. My answer to that is it depends on what your goals are. I have friends whose goal was to be published. Period. They weren't worried about the money. I have friends whose goals were to make five thousand dollars a month, and I have other friends whose goals were to make fifty thousand dollars a month.

**It really comes down to your ability to work hard, have a strong work ethic, and be willing to learn and grow and take criticism and be willing to put the time in.**

I've been doing this since I was twenty-five, and I'm thirty-seven now. That's twelve years, so this was not overnight. It looks like it to a lot of people. They say, 'Oh, you've been writing full-time for

three years, wow, three years, that's all it took.' That's not the reality. And when I was twenty-five I was writing on my own, just doing a little bit here and there, and so basically my whole life had led up to this. That's not a quick, money-making career. People who get into it with that thought process are going to struggle.

When she started out, was she thinking about becoming a bestselling author, or was she just writing for writing's sake?

This isn't something that many authors will say out loud, because it sounds a little bit egotistical, and I don't mean for it to come across that way at all, but when I first made the decision to chase after the dream of being published, it was never with the idea of mediocrity. It was always with the intention that I would be a bestselling author. And to me that was financial stability, it was recognition in the industry. I just wanted to be able to be an author and a name that people read and said, 'Hey, have you read that latest Shannon Mayer book?' That was my intention going in. I never doubted it. You have moments thinking, 'Oh God, this is the worst piece of garbage I have ever written in my life,' we all have that. But the overall belief was always there that at some point; if I just keep at this, day-by-day, book-by-book, I'll get better and I'll make it happen. Creative people, because we have that imagination, we can imagine the crash as much as we can imagine the finish line. That's the hard part.

## On imposter syndrome:

Every book I write, I get it. Every book. Oh God, is anybody going to buy it? Even after all these books, you think, 'What if this one tanks?' You can't help it. I found the trick is if you write a lot, you don't have time to think about the release, because you're already working on something else.

## Does collaborating with another writer mean you finish a book more quickly?

It depends on who you're collaborating with and your relationship with them. I wrote with Denise Grover Swank, who's also a hybrid author. She's a New York Times bestseller, she's amazing, and we're good friends, we have a very similar writing style in terms of pacing, character development and that sort of thing. We sat down for a couple of phone calls and we had a few brainstorm sessions as to where we saw the books going, and came up with titles, that sort of thing. Then we used Google docs so she could write down her ideas, and I could add to it. We plotted that way, and then we went chapter-by-chapter. We wrote two separate characters. I would write up a synopsis for one chapter, she would write her synopsis. And that's how we wrote the book. I would send her a chapter, she would send it back to me.

**Actually, in the last book we wrote together we deviated quite a bit away from the plot we had put out, and it became a game to see who could leave their character in the worst situation, for the other to get them out of. And that actually made it really fun.**

In the end our readers couldn't figure out who wrote which character. We let them guess, we didn't tell them right away. We both realised by the end of the second book we could have swapped, and I could have written her character's point-of-view, and she could have written mine.

That's what worked for us. I've seen other authors writing as a single voice all the way through. I don't know that I could do that. I have too strong of a writing voice myself, that I can see myself ending up trying to take over the story.

## Editing with a partner

We used each other more for that. We still used my editor for the first pass, her editor for the second, and then a copy editor, line edits, proofreading and that sort of thing. It's still the same process, but we used each other to work through the plot and figure out if there were any issues.



# Episode 18: Behind Sarah

## Pinborough's Eyes!

*Sarah Pinborough has had over twenty novels published in all kinds of genres; YA, fantasy, horror, adult thrillers and erotic fairytales (yes, that's a thing). She's written for TV and film, won awards, and, when we spoke to her, Sarah was promoting her new thriller Behind Her Eyes, which was getting incredible pre-publication buzz after a heated auction between some major publishers. Sarah had also recently revealed that her book 13 Minutes was being adapted for a Netflix TV show. Sarah is always funny, insightful and often eye-wateringly honest. Brace yourselves for one of our most entertaining author chats yet...*

### On getting a Netflix show:

Getting an online show is the most difficult thing, but I have the most wankery story. If there was ever an award for the Wankery Story, this story would get the Gold Wanker Award. There are so many ticks for wankerness in this story: I was in LA (one tick), just before the Oscars (second tick), and so I went to Chateau Marmont (big double tick), with Irvine Welsh (triple tick) at the dinner the night before the Oscars — I met Lady Gaga, that was quite interesting — while I was at the dinner, he said to me, 'You really need to meet my manager, because you two are both really driven, you both have the same work sensibility,' and I was a bit, 'I don't think I need a manager', but I'm not going to say no. So, out of politeness, I have this breakfast where I met this guy. He's lovely, a proper geek. Beneath the LA charm, I smell geek, y'know? But he's also an exceptionally good-looking man, so we had arranged to meet for breakfast, and I was starving and had a minor hangover, and I really wanted a proper breakfast, but as he walked in I thought I cannot order

breakfast, it's all going to wrong, I'm going to spill it. I sat there and starved and pretended to be an LA woman, 'No, no, I couldn't possibly eat any food.' He was great, he spoke to my screen agent here, and they all got on, and yeah, we ended up in a five-way auction for the rights for a book that isn't even out in America yet. And, to be honest, wasn't in paperback in the UK at that point, and hadn't really sold. It came down to Paramount, Dreamworks and Netflix, and then Netflix got it. We have Josh Schwartz, who did *The OC*, and *Gossip Girl*, and he's adapting it.

How does that work practically? Are they phoning you every twenty minutes saying, 'Now it's Paramount, now it's Dreamworks?'

No, what happened — and I think this sums up the experience of many an author — is that there were a lot of emails going around, and then there was this very long gap, where I wasn't getting any emails. So I messaged (my US manager) Trevor and asked what's happening. The last I heard was we were in this auction. And he said, 'What do you mean, what's happening? Haven't you seen the emails?' And, of all the people talking about the option of my book, I had been left off the emails! I thought, this is a vision of the future to come! It was funny. At this moment I was the most important person in this email conversation... in two months' time, I don't matter. I was that bonkers thing of so-and-so is interested, and of course it's Hollywood; the moment someone gets a sniff of something, everyone's interested. It's down to Trevor: he got it, he packaged it together. I have an LA team called Trevor and Dave... You couldn't get any *less* LA. The entertainment lawyer is called Dave, and he's amazing. He and Netflix, they both got bloodied with that contract. We gave some, they gave some. Dave is awesome and Trevor is awesome. I've got a great team.

# How do you end up having that kind of breakfast meeting? What were you doing five years ago?

It's an odd one, isn't it? Because there have been moments where you're working on something, you're doing some screenwriting, and it can be a real pain in the arse, and then you have to tell yourself, 'Look, you of ten years ago, who was teaching, and writing, hoping for a Gollancz deal or a HarperCollins deal, or a film deal, or a TV episode, *that* you would be staying up till five o'clock in the morning, working through the night.' Whereas I'm like, 'Ugh, I've got to do notes on this script.' I had this conversation a few years ago with Johannes Roberts the film director, and we talked about driven people. And the sad thing is driven people are never happy. The biggest realisation is you're never going to be happy.

***I've made peace with myself that I'm never going to be happy, but I'm trying to just enjoy the storytelling, and everything else is out of my control.***

Whether a book is successful is not down to me, it's whether the publisher has put money behind it. That's all that counts. I Tweet about my books, because that's me doing my bit. No one fucking pays any attention about the author Tweeting about her book. They pay attention if the Evening Standard Tweets about their book, or The Telegraph. The only thing I can do is write the stories I want to write, and if people want to buy those then that's great. I realised that nothing else makes me happy. I had a great year... and I'm still a miserable fucker.

# On the buzz surrounding her new book Behind Her

## Eyes:

We have some good buzz going on! And we've sold it in twenty-one countries now and it's coming out big in America, and there's a lot of stuff happening over here, we've got all the supermarkets and that kind of thing.

***I was quite lucky, in some regards, and in others I think it was testament to putting the time in with networking.***

I think you can be talented, but if you stay at home in the Outer Hebrides and never go to an event and never go to a convention, you don't get face-to-face with a lot of editors, and especially if you're working within genre it's quite a small pool and it's quite hard to break out. Crime I consider a genre, it's not mainstream, it's a *bigger* genre. I mean, fantasy or horror is hard — your Joe Abercrombies are few and far between. The editor at HarperCollins came to me and said she wanted to publish me, and I said that's great, but I owe some books, and I don't have any ideas, and she said, 'Just pitch me something that I can take (to our acquisitions meeting) in two weeks' time. It doesn't have to be brilliant.' Which anyone knows means it *has* to be brilliant. It was an awful week. I was looking after my friend's dog, whom I had to have put down, and then the wonderful Graham Joyce died that week, so I was in a real state, and I was walking up and down Chiswick High Road, looking for a cafe to figure out some idea for this book. And I had this idea of a couple, and an affair, and secrets, as all these thrillers do, and I thought this isn't enough, and so I went to a pub, and I had a glass of wine and thought I had just killed my career before it had even started, because I've had this great opportunity and I've got nothing.

***And then, as I opened my notebook, I got the ending.***

And there's been a lot of fuss online about the ending, which I was worried about as they could have been setting me up to fail, but it seems to be working okay. And so, I had the ending and I thought, y'know what, this *is* something special. And that's arrogant, it's very American of me. Americans are so much better at being positive about their own things than English people. But I did have that moment of 'Oh, yeah.'

You've always written in genre, but this is a proper  
put-it-on-the-shelves-next-to-Harlan-Coben-thriller,  
isn't it?

Well, it is and it isn't. John Connolly said to me it's going to be interesting to see how straight crime readers take to this book. It's going to be Marmite. There are some who will think that this is not a thriller. But to me it is a thriller. It has Pinborough-esque elements. I wanted to do a domestic thriller. It's hard to say these things without sounding like you're disparaging an entire genre, and I'm not because I *like* domestic thrillers, I read them all the time, but they conform to various rules and I wanted to break a couple of those rules and I'm hoping that it has. And I hope people like it, but I think it plays to the beats of a thriller, but it has added Pinborough.

## How much was she involved in the strategy of selling and marketing this book?

It was fucking awesome! Again, I'm going to go for the Wanker of the Year award... I was being interviewed by the Evening Standard this morning, and I said to her I'm very glad this wasn't my first book. Because, if I had been given the expectation that *this* was happened with every book, you could be in for some serious downfall if it didn't quite work. Whereas, because I've had twenty-odd books before this, I know that you can be in the coalmines for a lot of it. It's been amazing. My agent in New York has already been into Flatiron and had a presentation there about everything that they're doing. They're flying me for a two-and-a-half week tour of America, a plane a day for two-and-a-half weeks and I don't like flying, so that's going to be fun! Over here, they brought us in for a big marketing presentation. It's been amazing. We had a big dinner with various buyers. It's just been a whole different experience for me.

***I don't do envy of other authors. I think there's enough space for everyone to succeed.***

And people don't just buy one book. So, if they go into Asda and there are books for five pounds you're not going to just buy one. You might buy one this week, then one another week. I think we can be generous with each other, because it's a tough enough job without that.

## Do you write every day?

No! I think that's bollocks advice. It pressurises people to tell bad stories. I used to think it was important, and I used to really buy into that two thousand words a day, blah-blah-blah-blah, and I used to get caught up in other people's word counts, and I would find myself — when I first joined Twitter before I realised it just made people want to punch each other in the face — I would be like 'Ah, I've done two thousand words, now I'm going to the gym!' Yeah, I was that person... Clearly not now!

***I think the most important thing in writing is the thinking time. It's not about whether you're writing every day, it's whether you're thinking about your story every day.***

People say I'm quite prolific, and I am quite fast, but I think it's far more important to take some time and think about the best way to tell your story, than to be thinking 'I've got to write ninety thousand words in three months!' I appreciate, because I have been there, that for some people they have to hit those word counts because they have to get the book in time to write the next one, if they're writing three or four books a year to make their wages. To be honest, my suggestion would be get a proper job and write one really good book, because we've all wasted time churning out books that we haven't given enough thought to.

**To get your plotting right takes thinking. So don't write every day, certainly *think* every day.**

Also, I'm not a re-drafter. I don't do a lot of drafting. I'm a massive planner. I outline, I've got books of notes. It's not like I have the whole book planned out, that would be mental, but I have definitely the ending in sight, I know roughly what everyone's arcs are going to be, I might change bits, but I

plan in detail then I rough write in Scrivener, actually. I don't use it the way most people do, I use for planning, and I'll have little lists in it. When I was doing Mayhem and Murder I would put the old Times articles and log them, so *this* murder has *these* articles etc. I would have it like a clipboard or a notebook. I have a notebook, which I then transcribe to Scrivener. I'm a massive planner, but then I generally hand in draft one.

## What's the split between the time you spend planning and then writing?

I can knock out a couple of thousand words in an hour if I'm pushed. If I know what I'm writing. But my planning time is much, much bigger. I'm always planning. I'm not very good at relaxing. I've normally got more than one thing on the go, so I've got at the moment... I'm writing a short story... it was a five thousand word limit, but I've written about twenty thousand words! But I'm also using it as a treatment for a film. I'm going to write it as a movie idea. I thought I owe this short story idea, I might as well write it out, if they're prepared to take twenty-thousand words.

## Do you wake up with fully-formed ideas?

Do you know my biggest bugbear? I find writers very pretentious, especially on social media. It's given people this voice to be pretentious, but none of us are saving lives. We're making shit up. When the apocalypse comes they're not going to saying, 'Save those people who make shit up!' They're going be, 'Where are the brain surgeons, and the technicians and the plumbers? These are the people we need.' I don't let characters 'run away'. 'Ooh, my character's telling the story!' No, they're not, you fucking wanker. If your character is running away from you, then reign it in.



***To me it's like putting a puzzle together. Even when I wrote *The Death House* people asked 'Did you cry at the end?' and say of course I fucking didn't. I made it up.***

There are things I'm very grateful for, one of which is self-publishing wasn't an option when I started out. As much as I like to think I wouldn't have — and I know it's been very successful for some people — but unless you have a history in publishing, or have some publishing credit to your name, or understand how the business works, I see people who literally just write a novel and put it on Smashwords. Some of them are really half-decent writers, but there are things — loads of exclamation marks on page one — things that you think a decent editor would deal with.

***Self-publishing is fine, but do it with an editor and good cover artist.***

I'm worried that I would have become a Smashwords person without really giving it any thought. You hope you wouldn't... I've forgotten what the question was. I'm just ranting... There are very talented writers who do it well, but in the main, there is this sea of shit.

## On being English:

I treat writing as a business, but I'm very English when being positive about my work. I retweet things on Twitter, like everybody does, but I'm very English in that in that if someone says 'You write good books,' I'm like, 'No, read theirs, they're better than me.' That English way of doing things... Americans are different. I chaired a panel for Deborah Harkness and V.E. Schwartz, they're very lovely women. I read their books and prepared it quite well and it was really interesting to watch them talk about their books with such passion and such love. Whereas English people we're so, 'Uh, I've done a book... his book's better than my book... don't read my book...' Because you don't want to sound like you're bigging yourself up, do you? You have to be able to do that if you're going to self-publish.

## What kind of editor works best with you? Who's your perfect editor?

I've had some good editors. Natasha (Bardon, HarperCollins) is a friend of mine already, I liked working with Gillian Redfearn (Gollancz), Jo Fletcher (Jo Fletcher Books) was a good editor, but you have to treat it like a product. When you get editorial notes, you open the email, and you read them, and then you get up and walk around the room, you swear a bit, you get a glass of wine, and you say 'THEY JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND MY WORK! I CAN'T POSSIBLY CUT... oh, maybe that is a good point?' It just takes a bit of space. I was really lucky with *Behind Her Eyes*. We had this ridiculous auction in America. I was at FantasyCon last year, and the New York sub-agent had been saying 'I'm not sure we're going to sell this book in America, it's a got a lot of drinking and smoking...' and then she emailed me at FantasyCon and asked if I would be around to take some phone calls next week, and I said yeah, and I thought this was for me to try and make them *want* my book, but she said no, these people have already got money on the table. I had eight or nine telephone conversations with big editors in New York who were — as we were speaking — bidding for my book, but, what was wonderful, with each one I was asking, 'What would be your notes on my book? What thoughts have you got?' Each one of these very top editors in New York were saying, 'Well, I think that you could do this...' or, 'This detail would have worked...' I would write it all down, and take the best bits. And I had all these conversations with movie studios and took all those notes. So when it came to actually doing the edit for Natasha and Christine (editor at Flatiron) — we did a joint edit for America and London at the same time — I was saying 'What do you think about this?' They were like, 'These are such good thoughts!' I said, 'I know, I don't know where they came from.' I had to put no effort into my edit whatsoever, I had all the best thoughts from the best editors in America.

## That's not necessarily a tip that our readers can use...

No, but I would also say that a good copy editor is gold dust, and a good editor should give you a couple of things that really punch you in the gut, but invariably make your book better. With my book *13 Minutes*, over here we published that very much as a crime-crossover, adult-YA, but in America they're publishing it very much as YA, they made me cut *fifty pages from the first two-hundred*. I did it and, actually, it really worked... as a straight YA, I think the American version is faster. When I did it with Gillian (in the UK) we did it very much as a crossover, a different approach. I'm calling the UK one the Director's Cut.

## What are the common mistakes made by men writing female characters?

Don't have her having some big emotional trauma and then going down to the bed and breakfast for a big, hearty full English. (This was done by) a male writer, a friend of mine, and it was a great book, but I thought this is a man writing a woman, because no woman gets up in the morning and thinks, 'Well, my child is missing, but I'm going to have some sausage, eggs and beans, and everything's going to be right with the world.' Whereas a man would be 'Y'know what? I'm still going to have my breakfast.'

The thing is, there are not that many differences. It's all surface differences. Have you ever read these books by Nancy Friday? I bought them in my twenties and Nancy Friday got people to write in with their sexual fantasies, and she wrote two books and the female one was 'My Secret Garden', and the best thing about these books was the males ones were all 'Oh my God, I could never tell my wife these sexual fantasies,' and you look at the women's ones and they were all 'I'm getting gang-banged by two black men and an Alsatian.' Women are so much cruder than men

give us credit for. There was a lot of rape fantasy, which is a different world of its own. I had this argument with a writer — I remember Joe Abercrombie walking away, ‘I don’t want to get involved!’ — I was talking about the difference between rape fantasy and rape, which are *clearly* very different. A rape fantasy immediately has consent, because it’s a fantasy and it’s only in your head, and you can do whatever you like with yourself.

***I think as long as you don’t make her too soppy, or that ‘she’s gutsy’. I hate that gutsy thing. ‘Complex’ is better, we’re all complex. I don’t think there are strong men or strong women. So long as she’s interesting.***

## Talking about the book’s advance reviews and buzz:

I was reading a thing with Girl On The Train author Paula Hawkins, and she said it’s different when it’s you. I’m not anywhere near Paula Hawkins’ level, but I thought I would be more excited and I’m actually more nervous. My friend Emma, who works for Argos, which has just been bought by Sainsbury’s, she’s quite high up in that organisation, our plan is for that weekend, we’re going to get a little bottle of bubbly and she’s going to drive me round all the supermarkets in Milton Keynes, and I’m going to stand next to my book in the chart with a glass of champagne, taking a picture. Because if it never happens again, I’m going to have that. To be honest, whatever happens, this book has already made me more money than I’ve ever made. If I put my entire career before this book together, this book has made me more money.

## But if this is a success...

I’m going to be unbearable, and it’s going to be wonderful!

# They're going to want another!

I've halfway written the next one. It was really interesting. I went out for a drink with Will Hill and Tom Pollock, who are both genre authors. We were in the Phoenix bar, Charing Cross Road, and I was starting this book, and I was really worried about the second book, and Tom said, 'Don't try and out-twist yourself. That way lies M. Night Shyamalan.' In a lot of ways (the second book) is a better book, and it has a twist. It's more complex, it doesn't have the straight line to the twist. Once you've read *Behind Her Eyes* once, when you read it again you see it, which should always be the case with a twist. It should always be there. I don't like to cheat. It's still female-centric. I'm much more interested in women now I'm getting older.

## Why is that?

When I was in my twenties, if someone said you were one of the boys, then that was a real compliment. It was very much about keeping up with the men. I didn't want children, I didn't particularly want to get married — I did, but that was a brief mistake in Vegas — I'm not interested in shoes, or bags, or clothes, I just wanted to be successful. It's always been my drive. Which was considered, in those days, a male trait. I think women are very judgemental of each other. I'm a feminist, but to be a feminist you have to acknowledge that women are very judgemental of each other, and if we stopped doing that we'd all get on better. It takes being in your forties to see that, because you're not going to be the hottest girl in the room in your forties. You *are* in your twenties. Once you're out of that phase, you look and think flipping heck. I would always try and support Catriona Ward, for example, a brilliant debut novel. If I had to choose between a debut male or a debut female author to support, I will always support the female. I think women have a tough enough time as it doing everything. And they invariably do end up the ones who have to do everything. If they get married they have to do the house, the babies, y'know? I have friends who

work full time and have families and I can see them, 'Just come round a have some wine!' because it's a lot to deal with and the men just breeze through it. They think they're doing it, planting one little plate in the dishwasher and sitting down.

## Sarah's final tip for authors:

It's a really boring thing, but I think be charming. Be nice. You can see people getting very bitter — perhaps more so on Facebook than Twitter, because they think it's more of a closed network — very snooty about writing, or success, or if someone's been successful then they can't be a very good writer, and all this kind of boring bullshit that's been going on for years. I think you can either celebrate someone's success, or you can shut the fuck up about it. I think it's a tough enough choice for a career without us all back-biting. I will always try and help someone. If someone needs an agent I will always try and introduce them to an agent, or introduce them to an editor, because even if they went on to sell millions and millions of copies, that doesn't affect me as a writer, because my book could sell millions and millions of copies... or not! It just might not have been the book.

***When you get into this business, don't compare yourself to others because that way lies madness. There will always be someone doing better. And there will always be a million people who want to be in your position.***

In some ways I think social media is bad for writers, because you're constantly looking, and everyone else's life looks brilliant, and actually most people's lives are pretty mundane and ordinary and if we stopped showing our highlights we would see that, though I'm not one for showing miserable things online as I don't think it's fair on other people.

***Just concentrate on your own journey, but don't be bitter about anyone else's. That's not even writing advice, more career advice. If you force yourself to congratulate someone when you don't really feel it, afterwards you will feel a lot better.***

If anyone ever tells a newbie writer about this glass ceiling and people pulling up the ladder behind them... I have found that the most supportive people have been the ones who are the most successful. Charlaine Harris is a diamond, John Connolly has been so helpful to me, Stephen King blurbed my book, Neil Gaiman is lovely. I've had so much help from so many hugely successful people, and kind, and generous with their time, and I actually think the more successful people are, then of course the more generous they are because they're not scrabbling in the sand. You don't feel like you're fighting each other. Sometimes it can feel like that when you're on the lower rungs. If you're hanging out with writers who are bitter at the early stages of their career, get rid of those people, those people are not the ones you want to be hanging around with because they'll make you look at things wrongly... does that make sense?

For me, I'm very happy that it's worked out this way round. I would have hoped to have been rich with my first book, but I would rather have built towards something succeeding hugely. I've been very lucky in my career in that it's steadily improved, but it's not been that meteoric rise. Even Paula Hawkins had written other books under a different name. But when you have those people who have a debut book that hits all the marks, and you think is this what they think publishing is? At least when you start out in genre you have a rough idea that's not going to be the case. You're just happy to be seen in Waterstones.

# Episode 19: Joe Hill And The Head In The Refrigerator

*Joe Hill is the bestselling author of Heart-Shaped Box, Horns, NOS4A2 and, most recently, the blockbusting epic The Fireman. He's also written dozens of short stories and comic books, including Locke & Key, for which Joe won the Eisner Award for Best Writer. Joe is a powerhouse storyteller, and an endless well of writing advice, so be ready to take notes... lots of notes...*

## Joe on the power of two writers:

I've been looking forward to talking to you guys. I've actually been thinking about this for a couple of weeks now. In part, because I'm interested in how collaborations work out. I've been reading a book called Powers Of Two by a guy named Joshua Wolf Shenk, a psychologist, and he examined great creative couples like Lennon and McCartney, the Coen Brothers, Watson and Crick, and the way they form their own language and start to finish each other's sentences, and if you guys *do* succeed in publishing a bestseller I think it will be because you managed to get your partnership to that point where the two of you make more of the sum of your two parts.

*I'm also terrifically interested in what you're doing because I think there isn't a literary science. It is interesting, the idea of is it possible to consciously set out to write a bestseller. Of course, the answer is no, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't try.*



I have this thing that I'm doing where any book that makes more than fifty weeks on the New York Times bestseller list, I read it. I'm curious to see; what did everyone get excited for? What were they responding to? My plan was to start at the beginning of this century, so if it was a bestseller in 1987, that's different. What I'm interested in is recent bestsellers, and not just any bestsellers, but the kind of phenomenon books, like the *Gone Girls*, *The Girl On A Train*, *Fifty Shades Of Grey*, *All The Light We Cannot See*. I just want to know what people are responding to.

## How many hit that magic fifty mark?

Not too many. It's usually about one a year. I have to admit, I've not yet read *Fifty Shades Of Grey* yet, I haven't read *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*. I live in the same small town in New Hampshire that Dan Brown calls home, I have not read Dan Brown's books yet, I feel terrible because he's a wonderful guy, I've met him a few times, but I've still yet to read any of those novels. In the last six months I've read *All The Light We Cannot See* and I'm reading *The Girl On The Train* now, and I did read *Gone Girl*. It's interesting.

## Are you seeing any commonalities? Anything that helps these books stick around for so long?

Hmmmmmmm. No. Not really.

## Is it too broad to call your writing horror?

When I was a kid I used to read Fangoria magazine, which is this magazine dedicated to the art of the gross-out special effects. Every issue always came with a centrefold and instead of some pretty girl in her underwear, it was always some guy with an axe in his head and an eyeball popping out. I'd read it cover to cover, I was completely addicted, and it used to make me crazy, you'd have some guy who was in an interview saying 'I don't really think of myself as a horror director,' and he'd just directed Slumber Party Massacre VII, and I'm like, 'Dude, you're not fucking Fellini either. I see right through you.' I hate it when someone dodges, y'know, 'Ah, I'm not really a horror writer.' Heart-Shaped Box is a horror novel, NOS4A2 is a horror novel, that's a book about a guy who has a car that runs on humans souls instead of gasoline, so those are both pretty scary books. Horns, my second book, is not really a horror, it's more of a tragic satire. It does have elements of the supernatural in it. It was made into a film starring Daniel Radcliffe, so that has a cult status among my books. The more recent novel, The Fireman, is a big, action film, sci-fi movie that happens to be on paper.

## Where would someone start with your books?

It really depends on the person. If someone wants a really pedal-to-the-floor rollercoaster type experience they'd either want Heart-Shaped Box or NOS4A2, those are the two most straight-ahead *here's-a-thriller!* A lot of people have really enjoyed the comic book Locke & Key, the readership of my novels grew substantially after I started writing Locke & Key.

Your short stories are varied, too. Didn't you start out in short stories?

I sorta had my own bestseller experiment that I started in about 1994. This is not like top secret news or anything, it's been out there for over a decade, I come from a family of writers. My dad's the novelist Stephen King.

Never heard of him... Stephen *who*...?

He's got tremendous promise. He's written a couple of books. They've done pretty well. I come from this family of amazing writers. My mother's an amazing writer, my brother is. About the time I was 13-14 I knew I wanted to be a writer. I was writing every day. And I've written every day of my life since I was 14. I think I produced about 35 pages a week since I got to High School. When I was 18-19 I began to think, I come from this famous family, I have this famous last name, and it occurred to me that might be a disadvantage, not an benefit to me. I felt like there was too much potential that I would write a mediocre novel and that a publisher would see a chance to make a quick buck on the last name, and they would publish a book that wasn't very good.

***You can fool readers once, but you can't fool them twice.***

My feeling was that if this mediocre novel was published and readers looked at it they'd say, rightly, he only got published because he has a famous dad, I'm never gonna waste my time with him again. I couldn't imagine myself doing anything else and I wanted to have the longest, best-possible career. I felt like the only way to do that was to provide people with stories that really, truly excited them. Where it didn't matter who my parents were, it didn't matter what my history was. All

that mattered was they were into what was happening, and they wanted to know what happened next. I abandoned my last name and started writing as Joe Hill. Over ten years I wrote four novels that I was never able to sell. Dozens of short stories that I wasn't able to sell, and I collected my mandatory thousand rejection letters. The joke is that after writing four novels I began to think that I didn't have the talent or ability to be a novelist, that I had taken my swing and struck out. But I had written some short stories that had appeared in literary magazines and some of them had won some prizes or got prize buzz, and one of these short stories was noticed by a talent scout at Marvel comics, who invited me to write a Spider-Man story. And I remember feeling like, I really wanted to be a novelist, this was my life's dream, if it didn't work out, it's not happening, but... I've got a foot in the door over at the comic book business. And if I want to wind-up writing Ghost Rider and The Flash, that could be a pretty great life. I still get to tell stories and play make-believe for a living and that would be terrific. I was a comic book writer before I was a novelist. Around the same time I had around fifteen pretty good short stories. I couldn't sell them to any publisher in America, I couldn't sell them to any of the big publishers in England. A very small press in England, PS Publishing, took a chance on the book of stories because the editor there was himself a short story writer of fantastic and horror fiction, and they did a thousand copies and it won some awards, and got some buzz. I was able to sell a novel shortly afterwards, and then eventually it came about my pen name. As soon as I started doing public appearances people started to look at me and say, 'Doesn't he kinda look like...? Aaah...?' But at that point it didn't really matter because I had what I needed for my self-confidence. I needed to believe that I could do it. That I didn't need to lean on a family name. That people would enjoy my fiction for what it was as opposed to thinking, 'This is cool because his dad is someone famous.'

Ten years is a long time. Were there points where you thought this is never going to happen?

I remember I had sent several stories to C. Michael Curtis, the senior fiction editor at the Atlantic Monthly. He had written me back personal notes. He never published anything, but he had written back some stuff. I sent them a story that I thought was pretty good, and this is the old days, it was almost pre-internet, so I would send out a physical story, not a digital manuscript. I would include a self-stamped return mailer and they would send it back, so I could physically get back my manuscript so I could use it again. I sent one of my best stories to the Atlantic and I got back an envelope instead of my mailer with my short story. It was just the right size to contain a cheque. I thought holy shit, I've done it. I just got published by the Atlantic Monthly! I was married at the time, again this is pre cell phones, I didn't own a cell phone, no one did, and I went outside to the pay phone and I called my wife and I said 'Oh my God, I think the Atlantic Monthly just published me. I'm holding an envelope!'

And she said, 'Oh my God, that's the best. You've gotta tear it open and read it me!'

'Oh! Oh, this is the best.'

'I'm so proud!'

'I just don't believe it,' and I tore it open, and it was a photocopied form rejection.

Scribbled at the bottom was a note that said 'Sorry, we lost your story.'

***That was such a tremendous kick in the nuts that I remember thinking I'm pretty much done, it's never happening.***

I did spend three years writing this epic fantasy novel called The Fear Tree. And I thought I hit out of the park. I thought this thing was a smash and it got turned down by every publisher in America and it got turned down by every publisher in England, and for an extra kick in the pants it got turned down by every publisher in Canada. My dad had read the book and he loved the book, and he was always very supportive of the pen name, but I remember him saying when that got turned down, 'Maybe the deck was stacked too much...?' I knew what he was saying and I said, 'Dad, y'know, I think I would rather fail with a pen name than succeed knowing that I broke in using the

family.’ And he said okay, dropped the subject, and never brought it up again. After *The Fear Tree* it was probably another three or four years before I finally did sell (short story collection) *Twentieth Century Ghosts* and *Heart-Shaped Box*.

## What kept you going?

I think I was unfit to do anything else. At that point I realised I had written four novels — although, going back to when I was fourteen I had probably written twelve — I wrote my first book when I was fourteen years old. I wrote this thing about a private high school where the administration was a gang of satanic devil worshippers and that the cafeteria was serving a beef stroganoff of human bodies. That was a book called *Midnight Eats*. I think I wrote about twelve novels between the time I was fourteen and by the time I when I finally got published, which was at thirty-five. I think at about the age of twenty-eight, twenty-nine I thought there’s no way I’m quitting because I’ve put way too much time into this. After this long it’s no longer acceptable to screw it up. That’s one side, the bravado side.

## If you hadn’t been published, would you have considered self-publishing?

I don’t know if I ever would have gone for self-publishing because, for me, personally, I needed the validation of an editor. Self-publishing would have seemed like cheating to me. I think I needed someone to say ‘Yes, you’re good enough.’ I was never the kind of person who could say to himself that you’re good enough.

## Who was it who gave you that validation?

There were three people, but I want to go back to something you said in the very first podcast of the Bestseller Experiment, you said where people who are trying to achieve a dream, you make a point to remind them that the moment they're writing the first sentence they're *already doing it*, they're already having the dream.

***The dream is not the end result, the dream is getting there.***

What mattered about the Beatles — I'm a big Beatles guy, sooner or later every conversation comes back to the Beatles — we look at Sergeant Pepper and we say that was the moment it all came together. It's not true. The moment was playing every single night in Hamburg in the clubs. That was the moment when they became the Beatles. Before anyone knew anything about them except they were this bar band that made a good noise every single night. The stories that matter are the ones you didn't sell, that's how you created the first and most difficult creation of any artist's career, which is the invention of yourself. Inventing yourself is the real challenge, and, after that, the novels are easy.

## Has it become easier? Or is it harder to write since you got published?

I would say it got a lot easier after I got on anti-depressants. I had a lot of struggles with paranoia and anxiety. I had this totally cliched thing when Heart-Shaped Box came out and I had this bestseller and it was bigger than anything I had ever imagined, it sort-of hit my daydream, cleared the bar of my daydream, and then some. I immediately had a meltdown and couldn't handle it, I

had a nervous breakdown and wound-up divorced and terrifically unhappy and full of paranoid ideas and it was a bit of a struggle getting back together. The last two or three years have been some of the best and happiest writing I've ever done in my life.

## You mentioned the three people...?

Right! Who gave me validation... Three people that really mattered. The first was probably Stephen Jones, a British editor who does a lot of projects in horror and fantasy, this guy has edited hundreds of books, and he picked one of my stories for a best new horror anthology, he picked my story Twentieth Century Ghost. His acceptance of that story led directly to a talent scout at Marvel comics, Theresa Focarile, giving me a shot to write Spider-Man, and to me that was my big break. It sounds corny, but writing an eleven page Spider-Man story was my big break. I loved comics, and Marvel comics was a real publisher. And finally, and most importantly, Peter Crowther at PS Publishing who decided to publish my first book.

## Joe on rough first drafts:

I can fix a crappy page, I can't fix a blank page. My first drafts are full of ideas that I'll cut out later. I'm getting faster, much faster now, but it used to take me three years to write a book, and sometimes I would think it took me two years to write the first third of the book, and then about six months to write the other two-thirds. The reason why is I would churn out so much material figuring out who these people are, and just getting them talking to each other and trying to hear the sound of their voice. The specific way each character talks, and if I could find their voice, I could figure out everything I needed to know about them. Eventually it would get to a point where I was so comfortable with the characters I could plop them into any scene and figure out how they would solve a problem, how they react to difficulties. That's always what I'm trying to look for. On that



level, I don't care how much material I churn out, a fun new situation is always worth exploring, even if a lot of them don't make it to the finished book.

***My rule when I get to a second draft is every time I look at a chapter, a scene, I say to myself, 'What's awesome about this scene?'***

If I was a reader, what's so awesome that I couldn't wait to get to the next page? I need to see that in every page. Really, I need to see that in every paragraph, because I'm so scared the reader is going to put down the book. I thrive on fear. There's so many distractions, there's so much great stuff on Youtube, you guys haven't really thought about what you're getting into. You ever looked at Netflix? You've seen how much great stuff there is on Netflix? Why would anyone read your book if they could watch Netflix? You've seen Apple streaming music? All the Oscar movies are out. Why would anyone waste their time on your book? You've got to give them an amazing reason to keep reading. Every page.

***I'm absolutely ruthless about saying if there's not something just mind-blowingly awesome in this chapter it's gotta go.***

It's amazing how easy the stuff that's not awesome just drops right out of the book. It's like turning someone upside down and shaking the change out of their pockets. All that stuff you don't need.

## It's a bit like Marie Kondo's way of de-cluttering your house...

What gives you joy! Every page, that's right, every single page you have to defend why it's awesome. And this should be easier because there are two of you. There's one of you to say it's

not awesome, tell me why this is awesome, and the other to defend it. And if you can't persuade the other person, *boom!* It's gone. It's gotta go. It's the power of two. He says, I've got the first two lines — She was just seventeen, she was no beauty queen — and one of you has gotta say, that's a crap line, so you think some more and say 'Y'know what I mean?' and suddenly 'Ooh, that's filthy! It's great!' It's electrifying because you're good fencing partners.

You're a big fan of music. Have you ever drawn any comparisons between music and books, which have made some big moments in your writing?

I've managed to work my Beatles versus Stones argument into every single book. Sooner or later Beatles versus Stones comes up. I'm a big British Invasion guy; The Kinks, The Who, The Faces, I live and die by this stuff, even the later stuff. I love Oasis. It's horrible to think, but wasn't Oasis the best band of the nineties? My first book borrowed the title of a Nirvana song, Heart-Shaped Box. If you ask me what's the better song, I Hate Myself And Wanna Die, or Live Forever by Oasis, it's no contest. Live Forever! Absolutely.

What do you listen to when you write?

Do you wanna hear my new, weird amazing trick to get in the mood to write? It never fails, tremendously successful, I sit down — *boom!* — words start to flow. I play piano for a half hour before I write. I'm a terrible pianist. Dreadful pianist. I play piano, and I work at it for half-an-hour, and it seems to clear my head and put me into a different mind space, and when I sit down it just flows. No thought, no second-guessing. It's a warm-up. It's a lateral move. It's connected to writing

and reading, I'm reading notes, and there is expression, but it's non-verbal. It's this completely non-verbal thing and somehow it does something to prime the motor.

## Any other life hacks to share with us?

I was thinking about writing a bestseller. What do you do to write a bestseller? And I know some stuff and it's totally useless and it won't help you even the tiniest bit. The best thing you can do to have a successful, big bestseller is to get your book praised publicly in a high-profile media space by a big influencer. This morning on the front page of the New York Times they ran a big article on Barack Obama's reading and about how the president's reading kept him sane and grounded during the eight years he was president. He mentioned a science fiction novel called *The Three Body Problem*. I don't know what the Amazon sales rank for *The Three Body Problem* was yesterday... but today, at the time of this recording, it's number fifty on Amazon's list. The president loved it, he said so publicly, and it became a huge bestseller, and that is not the first this has happened. When Kennedy was asked what he liked he said he enjoyed the spy thrillers of Ian Fleming and the rest is history. Over here we have the Oprah Show, if you can get noticed by *someone*; Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Barack Obama, Donald Trump... I don't think Donald Trump has ever read a novel, so it's not likely he's going to recommend you. The other thing I'm certain will help sell books is if you can get on TV. Over here we have the Today Show, over there you guys have the Punch and Judy Show, or Richard and Judy Show? Something like that? If you can get on, then you'll be a bestseller, right?

What about praise from Lee Child or Stephen King on the cover?

Not sure that helps you. Not big enough. Lee Child and Stephen King are good, but they blurb a lot of books, and lot of books they blurb *don't* become bestsellers. Barack's gotta say something, man.

Who was the most influential media type who promoted you in the States?

Neil Gaiman said he loved Heart-Shaped Box unreservedly. They put that quote on the back cover and I'm sure it's why it sold. I was coming from comic books and I write a kind of scary dark fantasy that is in some ways more similar to Neil's work than to my dad's, and so I wanted to steal Neil Gaiman's audience, and he said sure let me help you with that, and gave the book a big quote. Janet Maslin has reviewed all the books in the New York Times and she said some early, terrific things about them. I would say a good review, from a high-profile reviewer can still move a couple copies. I don't know if it will make you a bestseller, but every little bit helps. I don't really know why the books have sold well. I think, and this is the flaw in your experiment, not to bum you out, trying to predict what's going to become a bestseller is a little bit like trying to predict which direction a flock of sparrows are gonna fly in. You can't do it. The readership is this giant, unpredictable crowd. You don't know what someone is going to write and suddenly that's going to electrify everyone because it's exactly what we need to be talking about.

***The only thing you can do... I had a track coach in high school, and we asked him once what's the best way to win a race? And he said if you start strong, and then you powerfully through the middle section of the race, and then put on a final burst of speed at the end... you'll have a good race.***

The only thing you can do is open your book with an absolutely mind-blowing powerhouse beginning, and then if the next two-hundred-and-fifty pages are completely irresistible, winding up to a brain-smashing *I-never-saw-that-coming* ending... you'll be fine. You'll sell some copies. It'll be all right.

Are conscious of going in with a firework display? I

have to end this chapter on an absolute cliffhanger?

Yeah, I think so. When I finish a chapter there had better be a reason to start the next one. You always try to end it the way Chandler discussed with the man coming through the door with a gun... I might have lifted that from one of your first podcasts, actually. On a practical level, I think people would rather read dialogue than big blocks of description.

***If you have characters with interesting voices, those pages will fly when you put two people in a room and they're not going to be nice to each other. There's some magpie part of our brains that want the gossip.***

It doesn't matter that these people don't really exist. We want to hear. 'He said *that?!*' 'She said *what??*' We can't help it. Especially if they have a really distinctive, fun way of talking. I've always tried to look for a way to make the characters verbally fun. C.S. Lewis does this, too. Reepicheep's dialogue is really, really fun. The Pensives say great things. In Prince Caspian, I think, Edmund

says to Peter, 'Do you really think you can beat him?' And he says, 'I don't know. That's why we're going to fight to find out.' It's such a great way to end a chapter, and such a great little line.

Your reviews talk about the horror aspect of your writing, but they also talk about the fun. You're trying to make your books humorous as well as scary?

You ever watch the Marvel movies? All the Marvel superhero films are like a textbook in great storytelling. I read a review where someone reduced them to 'Quip, quip, punch,' and I thought... Yeah? What's wrong with that? That works pretty good. Pauline Kael said movies are kiss-kiss-bang-bang, so another way of saying 'Is this chapter awesome?' is to look at it and say, 'Is there a kiss? Is there a bang?' No? Gotta go.

When you go into rewrites, what are you looking out for?

Short chapters and short sentences. If a chapter's going on it had better be going on because it's so awesome. Someone is being dragged behind a truck and their skin is getting flayed off and they're trying to wriggle out of the handcuffs. Something like that. It's the only reason I can think of for a chapter to go on longer than three pages.

***People like short things. Short chapters, short sentences, short skirts.***

A seven-minute pop song is never gonna fly, let's keep it to two-and-a-half minutes. Don't bore us, get to the chorus. If you're going to go long, if you're going to write a sentence that goes on for a full page, or if you're going to do a twenty-page discursive chapter, there had better be a damn good reason for it. I'm not saying you can't do it, although if you're writing an entertainment, sorry you can't do it. If you're writing literary fiction, you can do it, but you guys aren't. You guys want to write something where the pages are going to fly, I guess it'll be an eBook, so the button will fall off because someone's pressing it.

By the way, when I said I read bestsellers, I also pay close attention to what sells in eBooks. That's become an increasingly important part of the market, and reveals something about readers. The mask has come off and we've seen this hidden face, this whole hidden demographic. Clearly, people really like to read dirty fiction. They didn't like doing when they had to read a book where it was like naked people on the cover, but if they can read it on an anonymous device they did. We dig the people undressed, monkeying around.

## Are you a structured writer? Or do you write whenever it happens?

It's kind of gone through a transition recently because for about three or four years I was doing all my first drafts longhand. Prior to that I had done most of my work directly into the computer, and then I went through this whole phase of really enjoying the notebooks and being disconnected and no Twitter, no text messages, I put on my vinyl, and I wrote longhand and that was terrific. I wrote the last twelve issues of my comic book longhand, I wrote *The Fireman* longhand, I wrote three of the four novellas in the upcoming book longhand. It was a terrifically satisfying way to work. However, I have gone back to the computer and that's been a real rush. It's like I spent years running with weights and now I've put the weights down and I'm working without them and that's

pretty exciting. Writing longhand was like resistance training. In terms of my pattern, I expect to get between fifteen-hundred and three thousand words every day. More and more I find myself looking for three thousand, not fifteen-hundred. We've got some deadlines to keep, let's go ahead and make them. I've been a lot more relaxed, so it's been a little easier to get my pages in.

## If you're up against a deadline and feeling anxious is there something you can do that calms you down?

Playing piano has been terrific, because prior to that most what I did was I would go out for a long drive, and find someone's pet and then I would strangle it in a ditch, y'know...? I generally found that killing pets, killing animals in the wild, seemed to stir something... Kept me motivated. You can have awkward conversations and visits from people in uniforms and stuff, so the piano has been a huge step forward.

***My trick when I sit down is I decide 'This first paragraph is only going to have three sentences in it, and the first sentence is going to have three or four words.'***

I love a great two word sentence. It's like a hammer and a nail. *Tyres smoked. Thunder boomed.* Y'know? I love that. For the reader it's a real kick in the pants. I'm not thinking about the whole day of work, I'm not thinking about the whole scene, I'm just thinking about *What's one awesome sentence I can put on the page?* I just want to find that one little four or five word sentence where the reader will feel a little bit like, 'I didn't think that was going to be the next thing I read.' Norman Mailer used to compare it to a boxing match, and I sometimes think it is a little bit like that, it's almost like you're beating the reader. Why a reader would pay to be pummelled I don't know? But you're trying to stick 'em again and again. *Boom-boom, here's another one, you didn't see that coming, boom!*



If you're writing a mystery, there's a temptation to have a scene where someone calls someone on the phone for information... okay... but that's not awesome. We've seen that scene in a million movies. Why do they have to talk on the phone? Can't you have them talk someplace more interesting? What if one of them checks safety on a roller coaster and they have to have the conversation on a roller coaster? Can't you put them somewhere else? Get them off the phone! Don't have them talk in the kitchen, I can't imagine anything more boring than that. Have them talk someplace interesting. And right away you have to figure out why they don't like each other. They *do* like each other? That's not that interesting. Your detective is trying to get information out of this woman and she hates him. Why does she hate him? Just because she doesn't like his face? She doesn't like his car? He comes to *her* neighbourhood in *that* car? Showing off how much wealthier he is than everyone else in the neighbourhood? What's his deal? What's his problem? Why does he look down on her? You've gotta have conflict, you gotta have friction. Or... maybe she's really lonely and she likes the guy? And then it's an uncomfortable seduction or something, but there has to be something. It can't just be that he needs some information and she's going to give it to him. That's boring.

***People will start a story with someone waking up, turning off the alarm, and opening the fridge. There's no reason to hear about them opening the fridge unless there's a severed head in there. If there's a severed head in the fridge, I wanna know... otherwise, let's move it along.***

## What's the one piece of advice that's stuck with you through your career?

I want people to keep listening to the Bestseller Experiment because they're gonna get a lot of good advice, they're going to learn a lot from the podcast and I'm following along, too, I'm also

interested to see what I can learn. Though, now I'm going to say something that is a little bit of a bummer, which is I've had lots of good advice from my mom, my dad, from various mentors, from very experienced writers, but I never really learned the things I needed to know from the advice of other people.

***Everything I learned about good writing, I learned from reading a lot of good books.***

That's basically how I got it. I mentioned that I had a little bit of a nervous breakdown after my first novel. I was in a really bad place, and I started all of these books that I couldn't get going, and I had another book due, and then it was a year overdue, then two years overdue, and things were getting pretty bleak. At a certain point I said fuck it, I can't write my own novels, I'm all done writing my own novels, I can't do it anymore. And I got a copy of one of my favourite novels, Elmore Leonard's *The Big Bounce*, and so every day I would sit down and I would write four pages from *The Big Bounce*. I copied it sentence-by-sentence, page-after-page, and then as I went along I started to change sentences, or to add material. I had this idea that I was going to finish it and release for free on the internet and it was going to be called *The Bigger Bounce*.

After I got twenty pages in — just copying his words, his sentences, his rhythm, his dialogue, the feel of his characters — I would push it to the side and I would start writing *Horns*, which was my second novel. *Horns* isn't anything like Elmore Leonard, but in the process of working on Elmore Leonard's material I found I could make a transition to my own voice. It loosened up stiff muscles, and, at a certain point, when I was about eighty or a hundred pages into rewriting *The Big Bounce*, I quit working on Elmore Leonard and just gave myself over full time to *Horns*.

If you want to learn how to be a good writer, I would say read a book where you say this book is it! And read it again. And read it again with a highlighter and a pencil. Count words. How many words did he put in each paragraph? When he has dialogue, how long does his dialogue generally go? Does he write pages of dialogue? Does he only write three or four exchanges? What's going on?

Know that book inside out and, if you have to, rewrite it. Sit there and physically run his or her sentences through your brain. You will learn rhythm, you will learn how to dance.

***You're copying someone else's dance moves and learning them for yourself. And, eventually, you will be able to dance your own dance.***

It's been ten minutes since we talked about The Beatles. What did the Beatles do in Hamburg? They didn't play their own tunes. They played Chuck Berry, they played the girl bands, they played those songs, and they *played* those songs, *and they played those songs*, and by the time they were writing their own songs they knew the structure of a three minute rock and roll tune inside out. They knew all the tricks, all the vocal intonations that would elicit an emotional reaction. Students of Go, who learn how to play the game of Go, traditionally are not allowed to play their own game of Go when they begin studying. Instead, they have to play their way through a hundred classic games of Go, playing both sides of the games, working from a booklet that shows them what moves were made, to learn the moves of the masters, before they even begin with their own stuff. It's a good way to learn.

# Episode 20: Kindle Direct

## Publishing with Darren Hardy

*If you're going to be self-publishing on eBook, you're almost certainly going to be publishing on Kindle. We were delighted to speak to Kindle's head of Kindle Direct Publishing, Darren Hardy, at Amazon's recent Amazon Academy Conference in London.*

### About the conference:

The idea of today is that we're gathering together a whole succession of small, medium enterprises and business owners. People who are taking the digital economy on and making it work for them. As part of that we have a whole session here for authors who are publishing through Kindle Direct Publishing, and using all the tools and processes to help them live the dream of becoming an author. We have some presentations, we have some panel discussions where authors will be helping each other out by sharing advice and experiences that will hopefully inspire another generation of authors to give Kindle Direct Publishing a try.

## Can authors access some of the resources on offer today?

This is part of a series of events we've been running and if you go onto [the KDP Youtube page](#) there is a video of a session we did in Dublin last weekend, which covers much of the same ground that we're covering here in terms of how you get started.

***What does the business of an independent author look like? How do you manage the creativity and the business side of things? At the moment we have all eight hours of that event in one clip!***

We're in the process of editing it down into individual sections, so I think anybody who's looking for an insight in terms of what we're discussing today, that would be a great place to start, as well as the community forums, where there's a whole host of authors helping each other out in terms of the key questions that indie authors have when they first start out.

# Why should an author be thinking of Kindle Direct Publishing?

The thing that we hear from many authors, that's really important for them, is the speed. Obviously, there's a hugely intensive creative process that needs to go into writing a book, and we hear authors so often saying, 'Focus on getting the book right,' because the publishing process is actually relatively straightforward, but it's really important you have the strongest book that you feel you can create, ready for that publishing process. So, when you come to think about your options in terms of publishing, the speed of independent publishing is very important for many people.

There are many advantages to lots of different ways of publishing, but what independent authors tell us is they love having control. What does the cover look like? What does the product description look like? How are they going to market that book? How closely can they interact with their readers? I think independent publishing gives you the option to control each of those things.

***The royalty rates are market-leading, up to 70%, and I think the ability to react to events, to update your product, to really get into the nuts and bolts of publishing and reader interaction are probably the key callouts for the authors that we hear from.***

# What are the common best practices for authors starting out?

One of the key things that we hear from authors is to take it seriously. If you've invested the time to write a book, and we know this can take weeks, months, in some cases years to write a book, then treat the publishing process as seriously as that to give your book the greatest chance of success. Think about how you want to market your book, think about how you want it to appear on the Amazon website to give it its best shot. Whilst the process is really easy and straightforward, it doesn't mean you should just bang it out over the course of an hour. Make sure you do what's right for you. When you're thinking about a marketing plan, think about how you want to interact with your readers. *Do you* want to interact with readers on Facebook or Twitter? If you don't, that's fine, but be clear on what you want to do beforehand so that you don't find yourself drawn into areas that you're uncomfortable with. As part of that, develop a marketing plan, think about how you want to reach your readers.

***Mark Dawson talks about the amount of time he spent building a mailing list that helps him interact with his readers.***

Other authors that we've dealt with focused a lot more on Facebook, for example. Some authors will spend a lot of time making sure that the author page on the Amazon website is really attractive, with a photograph, biography, videos, those kinds of things. As an author, you might want to do all of those things, you might only want to do one or two, but think about it ahead of time so that as you launch your book out there into the world, your readers get the best chance of finding it and you're happy that you've given it the best shot for discovery.

## What helps those successful authors get front and centre on the Kindle homepage?

I think it's more about what the reader is looking for. Mark Dawson and others talk in a lot of detail about the fact they spend time researching what their cover art should look like. If you're writing a gritty crime novel, for example, there will be an expectation of the type of cover that you would expect to see. Similarly, with the product description, if you're writing a light-hearted romance novel, your product description needs to reflect that, so that when readers discover your book they're encouraged to look further, to have a look at the sample of it, to give it a go maybe through a promotional deal. That's what starts the process rolling for readers; to find your book on the website, think 'That looks quite interesting, I'll look at it in more detail,' and then hopefully they'll be tempted to buy. And that's what really helps the book surface in all the right places. We're always looking to recommend new reads to our customers, and if we can see enough customers clicking on a book, buying a book, that enables us to recommend that to other readers, and so the process rolls from there.

## It's not just sales? You're looking at the product description, reviews etc. All these things count to help make you more visible on site?

From a reader's perspective, absolutely. It's very easy for a reader to be put off a book, to maybe keep clicking and go and look at something else, so the more you can do as an author in setting



out your stall, having a really good cover design, and remembering that cover is going to appear as a thumbnail size on the Amazon site, it's not going to be an A4 multicoloured extravaganza on that screen.

From an Amazon point of view sales are important when it comes to how we recommend titles to other readers, but then we have other merchandising features like 'Most Wished For' and 'Frequently Bought Together,' where there are other variables at play, but I think from an author's perspective, making your product description and product page as compelling as possible will give you the greatest chance of getting that traction with readers.

## Kindle Unlimited seems to play a big part in this. Tell us about that.

Kindle Unlimited is a subscription programme for readers. You subscribe for £7.99 a month, and then you get unlimited access to a broad range of titles within the store. The great thing about Kindle Unlimited is it's perfect for those readers who are looking to try something different, or to maybe look to read lots of titles within fiction, or crime fiction of whatever it might be. From an author's perspective, the great thing about being in Kindle Unlimited is it's an easy way for readers to try you out. It may be that they've heard about you from a friend, but they're not quite sure if your book is the right one for them. With Kindle Unlimited you've paid your subscription as a reader, you may be much more inclined to give it a go, and then that can help the process turn in terms of someone trying in Kindle Unlimited, and thinking yes this was a great book, I'm going to tell my other friends about it. And then, potentially, buy the author's other books. It's a great discovery program, and we're hearing from many, many authors how it's helping them expand their readership all around the world.

## Are there any books that have really surprised you by shooting to the top of the bestsellers?

I think the joy of publishing is that there are always surprises. I don't think there's anything that has particularly surprised me when you look back on it. I guess that's the challenge. When you look back on a title and you think well of course that's a great read. The author has put a really great jacket on there, or it's a really great idea. Certainly over the last year or so, within independent publishing, one title that really created quite a storm was *The Rabbit That Wanted To Fall Asleep*. It really captured people's attention in terms of solving that perennial problem of how do you help your children get to sleep at night. When you look back on it, of course it's no surprise. It's a great book, a really great author, and a really great idea. I wonder if six months before it was published whether anybody would have predicted that book would top the charts? That's one example, but the great thing in the publishing industry is we're all looking to see what's the next big thing going to be?

## What are the big changes that are coming in publishing?

Authors are thinking much more globally now. They're really excited about the power of technology to help them find readers. Independent publishing streamlines the process. It gives authors much greater control. You can reach readers all around the world. Authors are reaching readers in the US, readers in Australia, and to be sat in your house in a particular town thinking yes, I can reach readers all around the world is a really inspiring opportunity.

And if someone was foolish enough to try and write a Kindle bestseller in a year (ahem), when would you start putting those building blocks together?

I think you start that as soon as you can. Again, it's down to you. You've set yourself a very clear target — there's nothing to say it can't happen! — and, for many authors where you have a very clear objective that you want to get to, working back from that target, thinking what do we need to do, what do we want to do? It sounds like you want to everything and anything possible in order to make this happen, which is absolutely right.

***From that point of view, the marketing side starts straight away. You can build a brand, and there are all sorts of ways you can do that, using your own website, blogs and podcasts.***

Start to engage your readership and build excitement about this forthcoming product. I don't think you can start early enough with those kind of things. The key thing to keep in mind is this is what it's all building up to. Because, who knows, you might suddenly decide that putting out podcasts is by far the thing that we're most interested in and that's going to be our key focus. If you're building up to a book, then keep that momentum going and good luck!

# Thank you! And where is the best place to start with KDP?

The best place to start is [kdp.amazon.com](https://kdp.amazon.com), which is the home page for KDP. As well as having some instructional videos and help content, there's also a link to the community page, where you can go onto the forums and talk to other authors about their experiences. There is a Facebook page that we run, where we send out posts fairly regularly.

***One of the things that amazes me about the independent author community is just how generous they are with their time.***

And when we run events like this we have many authors who are absolutely delighted to come along and speak about their experiences, because they've all faced a position where they may not have done this. They may have been deterred by something and they just kept going. Somebody helped them get through it, and look at the success they've had, and they're really keen to pass that on.

***For any author thinking about the start of the author journey, whatever route they choose to go down, find other authors, talk to other people and there's lots of support and help out there.***

# Episode 21: Mark Dawson - From Mainstream Obscurity To Indie Success

*Mark Dawson is another great indie author success story. He had been published by a mainstream publisher, but to little success. After a friend introduced him to Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing, he decided to give it a go. Now, over two million downloads later, he is one of the UK's most successful indie authors and we were delighted to speak to him at Amazon's recent Amazon Academy Conference in London.*

We started by talking about a blog post where he had celebrated his millionth download.

I don't blog very much, not nearly as much as I should do. I'd had my millionth download at that point, these days it's nearer two million now.

What prompted the move to indie publishing?

Well, first of all it wasn't difficult to beat the level of success I had the first time around. I didn't sell many books. Partly, because they weren't very good, and also because I couldn't really work out

what was being done to promote and merchandise the books. They were published, and they disappeared again without making much of an impact.

***The difference now is I get to do everything. I'm in charge of everything in the process, from writing the book, then to market it, produce it, to advertising it, promoting it, to reaching out to fans.***

There's no one standing between me and my readers, unless I want them to. It's a tremendously liberating way to publish these days.

## It's a lot of work for you. What's your daily routine like?

I tend to split it into two parts. I'm creatively freshest in the morning, so I'll do my words in the morning. I aim for between two- and three-thousand words a day, which is not that ambitious. I can usually hit that. I'll take a run at lunchtime, or go for a walk, or just do something to meditate for a bit, and then I'll switch into using a different kind of energy with the business side of things. I'll be doing advertising campaigns — I'm quite big on Facebook ads — I'll look at Amazon's new ad platform, I will answer reader emails, I'll look at covers, all of that kind of stuff. And then, maybe at the end of the day, I'll do a bit more writing. If I hit that kind of pattern, I'll everything done I need to get done.

## Is that a skillset you had to learn?

I don't think it's a question of learning something. I love doing what I do. It's an absolute privilege to be able to make a very good living from selling stories to readers around the world. I have to pinch myself sometimes just to remind myself that's what I'm doing. I've been a lawyer before, so I know

what it's like to have a desk job that you don't like, so I'm very fortunate to be able to do this. It's not a chore. It's something I love every single minute of what I do. I find that motivates me to sit down and put the hours in. If you don't enjoy writing, then you definitely don't want to be a writer, you want to be doing something else.

***Not everyone will also love the business side of things as much, but it's a reality that to be successful at a decent level, you need to at least have the ability to change hats and to do a little bit of the promotional, business side of stuff as well.***

You spoke of a tipping point. How do you know when you're a success?

The easiest way to judge that is by how much money Amazon and the other platforms are paying you. I'll be two years as a full-time, self-employed writer in November 2016 (a few days after we recorded this conversation). In January 2014, my wife was on maternity leave and I was starting to do quite well, I was earning about as much from writing as I was from my day job. And so we had a conversation that, if I could sustain that level of sales for twelve months — she wasn't working, so I needed to support the family — then we'd look at going full time. She was very supportive. She would have pushed me to go much quicker than I did. Throughout that year, every month, it incrementally increased. January was the same, February, maybe twice as much... By November, when I quit, I was making a good five figures a month from writing, and though I'm naturally quite cautious, at that point I couldn't really ignore the fact that this was now very successful, and I could take what was, at that point, a very reasonably small risk and go full time.

## How many books had you published by that point?

About fifteen. Obviously, they're not all selling at that huge rate, but I tend to write in series, so that would be a good piece of advice for you guys:

***It's easier to market a series, than it is to market a standalone book.***

I survey my readers all the time, so I know my read-through rates are quite big, so if I can hook you with my first book in a series, there's a reasonably good chance that you'll buy a few more. My readers will buy at least five in a series, typically. Once you know that kind of information, then you can start to make decisions on marketing and all that kind of good stuff.

## That's the kind of information you might not have had access to with a mainstream publisher.

I'm not sure they are looking for that. They certainly don't speak to their readers to the same degree that I do to find out what they like and what they don't like. That is one of the real benefits of independently publishing through a platform like Amazon. All the other guys, too, they'll provide you with almost instantaneous feedback by way of sales data. I was taking daily records of all sales until about eighteen months ago, when it was taking me two hours just to go through all the platforms to do that. I only do that once a month now. It's actually quite liberating. Writers are constantly seeking validation: *Have I sold? Have I sold? Have I sold?*



# What are the best ways of reaching out to your readers?

Open all channels. Make it really easy for people to get to you. It could be in the backs of your books, having easy hyperlinks out to your website, or to your mailing list.

***The main piece of advice: all authors these days need to have a mailing list. The most important aspect of any creative professional's career is to go directly to your readers, and not to rely on the platforms to do that for you.***

I love Amazon, they've changed my life, but Amazon is not about to give me the email addresses of everyone who's ever bought my books. That's proprietary information, and they'd be breaking the law if they did that. You want to start to reach out to them by getting their email addresses and using a mailing list.

Social media is a big thing. I'm very big on Facebook. I'm primarily known in the author community as the guy who does Facebook ads, and teaches other authors how to use them.

***I spent a quarter of a million on Facebook ads, and that can lead to an explosion in sales and sign-ups and all that kind of stuff.***

## Hang on, back up: a quarter of a million pounds on Facebook ads? What's the return on that?

Double, usually. That's what's really cool about advertising these days. Fifteen years ago, an advertising campaign would not necessarily immediately be rewarded with sales. It's awareness, this whole seven touches of advertising, to eventually prime people to purchase down the line. With a directed social media campaign you can — and it's reasonably easy — get sales immediately. You get the ad, the ad links directly to the Amazon page, and you can generate sales. And, even more cool, you can track them individually, so you can work out how effective the ads are in terms of performance. It sounds like a big number, and it is a big number when I say that, but it's not a sunk cost. That's an investment that's paying me back almost immediately.

## If a major publisher came knocking at your door, would you be home to them?

It depends where they are and what their offer is. I'm a pragmatic guy. I sell foreign rights, I do deals with big publishers in Germany and France and Spain, the Czech Republic, and others coming down the track. For English rights, which is the bulk of where income comes from, if Penguin came to me and said they wanted to buy my John Milton series, I would certainly open the door to them. On the one hand, the blessing, and on the other hand, the curse, is that I know exactly what those books are worth. I know what they've generated over the last two or three years, and I can project what they might make over the course of the future two or three years. So

any offer I would need to consider would need to bear that in mind. For all the will in the world, when I write, and I think I write pretty good books, and my readers like them, but most people listening to this podcast won't know who I am. If you put yourself in the shoes of an editor at a big, traditional publisher, they would need to make a big, seven-figure offer for those books, and it's just not going to happen. If it *did* happen, then I'd consider it, but realistically it's very unlikely.

## Do people not know who you are because the mainstream press don't review indie authors?

That may not be true. Because I advertise so extensively I have got to the stage know where, say, my mum has emailed me and said, 'This woman I used to work with, who didn't know that you were an author, asked me about your books yesterday, because her son had seen a Facebook ad... or had read your books.' So, there is a bit of that now. I'm not focused particularly on the old ways of promotion. I do have an agency working for me on PR, and we are trying to get some reviews. There's still some value in having a Sunday Times review. It's definitely not essential, but when you get to a certain level it can be useful social proof that you've had that. Maybe I'm being self-deprecating? Maybe more people know about me than I think that they do.

## What changes do you see coming in the next few years?

The technology penetration may have peaked in certain markets, so things like Kindle sales have plateaued probably, but I don't think eBook penetration is anywhere near where it's going to be. I think the future is mobile. If you look at every iOSX device, it's now pre-loaded with iBooks, the

Kindle app is great on all devices, a really seamless way to consume media. Audio is going to be increasingly big, so I'm quite big on companies like ACX, an Amazon company that enables books to be narrated and produced. I also do deals with Audible Studios as well, so they do the production and the promotion, so that makes sense to me, to offload that to the experts. We're nowhere near a tipping point yet, in terms of where the industry's going. I wouldn't be buying shares in paper right now, I'd be more interested in buying shares in Amazon and Apple and those guys.

## What software are you using these days?

I use Scrivener. I'm a very, very big fan of Scrivener, a UK-based company. I was writing on Word for a long time, but Word is not configured for hundred thousand word documents, it just isn't. It's great for editorial work, but it's useless for those kinds of big documents. Scrivener is not a secret anymore, a lot of the big authors use Scrivener, certainly a lot of the big indies that I know are using Scrivener, and as soon as I switched over, my productivity went through the roof. The organisational abilities, writing out of sequence, *everything* is so powerful. I'm a massive, massive fan.

# Episode 22: Ben Aaronovitch and the great bollocking...

*Ben Aaronovitch is the author of the bestselling Peter Grant series that started with Rivers Of London in 2011 (published as Midnight Riot in the U.S.). Each instalment in the series pre-orders magnificently, and it's since spun-off into comics, there's talk of a TV series, and the audiobooks read by Kobna Holdbrook-Smith are highly recommended. We had already recorded a brief interview with Ben at GollanczFest in 2016, but we were delighted to get him for the full hour for a conversation full of fireworks. We started by discussing Ben's first breakthrough, writing the Doctor Who series Remembrance Of The Daleks when he was just 23...*

## How did the Doctor Who gig come about?

In those days script editors were quite important in the way television was structured. You must always send your script to a person — if you send it 'To whom it may concern' it just ends up in a rubbish bin somewhere — and I picked out a script editor, I sent a sample script in, and a very nice lady called Caroline Alton said, 'What do you like doing?' and I said Crime and Science Fiction, she said write a sample script of Rockliffe's Babies and a script for Doctor Who and I will pass them on to the relevant script editors. Had Rockliffe's Babies gone for another series I would have been writing for that as well, and history would have been different.

## Were you a Doctor Who fan beforehand?

The word 'fan' is a very difficult one. Back then, I thought a fan was someone who watched the programme on a regular basis. I had no conception of what the word 'fan' meant, especially a Doctor Who fan. Back then it meant a completely different thing. I liked science fiction, but I wasn't a *fan* fan. I said yes, because I really didn't know what a fan was when they asked me that. So, now they say I was a fan writer, which I find hilarious.

## If you were a fan, would it have been too much pressure?

I don't know. I was young, and I was stupid, and naive, and when you're young, stupid and naive you don't know what pressure is, because you have no idea what it is you're actually doing.

***You just charge in and say 'Yes, I shall write this thing, and it shall be the best thing ever!'  
Which is a good thing.***

I recommend that attitude for all starting writers. It's like that bit in Blackadder when George says 'I'm ready to go at the Hun,' and General Melchet says, 'Yes, if nothing else, the total inability to face facts will get us through.' For writing, that's good advice.

## Did you have a bigger career plan at that point?

(Ben laughs uproariously) *There's no career plan!* You don't have a career plan. It's like when they say to look for an agent you should check the Writers' & Artists' Yearbook. No!

***You apply to every single agent in the book. Send it to every single bloody publisher in the Writers' & Artists' Yearbook, and then look some other ones up on the internet and send it to them as well.***

There is no careful plan, because what you are relying on is somebody has to *really* like the book, and everyone's different, so there's no point carefully researching what they usually like, just send it to them on the off-chance that one of them will like it. They don't like that. because it means they get a huge reading pile. Colour me not-very-impressed. I don't care. That's not my problem. Your reading pile is not my problem. Hire some interns, work your way through them.

## With Doctor Who, you wrote the novelisation of the series. How did that come about?

I just ended up being sucked into the process. In those days, WH Allen, as was, automatically offered you the chance to write the novelisation, and if you didn't want to do it Uncle Terrence (Dicks, creator of the Daleks) was always available to do a knock-off. Of course, we — our

generation — went *Yes!* A chance to get paid to learn how to write prose. Apart from a script, it was the longest bit of prose I had ever written in my entire life. Again, it was that thing of ‘I’ll write the best novelisation ever, because I don’t know any better!’ I had my copy of (William Gibson’s) *Neuromancer* in one hand...

## Was that your guide?

No, it was (William Gibson’s) *Count Zero*. It was the first book where the *style* was important. It was the transition from reading cool spaceships to actually realising style of language makes a difference. People always say that William Gibson was about the shades and coats. No.

***The thing about William Gibson was the way he used language to describe the technology, and the way he used technological metaphors, and applied them to real life.***

People weren’t doing that in science fiction. Cyberpunk wasn’t about cool women in dark shades on rainy streets — although that was cool, I’m perfectly down with that — it was about the way you used language to describe technology and society and things like that. For me it was, anyway. Your mileage may vary. I didn’t know what I was doing, so I just did it.



You were talking about the way they used language; were you looking at it at a granular level? Stuff like sentence structure?

No, I never look at things like that at a granular level. I'm not a granular writer. The whole worship of the sentence is a very Guardian literary thing. It's the sort of thing that's discussed on the Open University. It's to disguise the fact that what's mostly considered literature is terrible. It's got lovely sentences, but it's mostly crap, in the same way that most science fiction is really good ideas with bad writing. That's why, when a book comes along that does both people go, 'OH MY GOD! IT'S SO BRILLIANT!' (Hilary Mantel's) *Wolf Hall*, right? Good substance *and* written in a literary style.

What made you switch from writing *Doctor Who* to writing novels?

My career went *Thonk!* I woke up one morning and found out that I didn't have a career. Television, and the media generally, is like a bus: you get on the bus, and once you're on the bus, you move around inside the bus. If you fall off the bus you're left sitting on the tarmac while the bloody thing is receding into the distance. It takes you a tremendous amount of effort to get back on the bus. It literally took me twenty years to get back on the bus. Strangely, the route that I took... I spent fifteen years, running like crazy, trying to get back on the bus, writing scripts. I was broke and working for Waterstones. I *liked* working for Waterstones, but you don't get rich working for

Waterstones, and if you lived in central London like I do, you can't even break even. I was looking at bankruptcy. I had been there about a year, and I was shelving books, and I ran the science fiction and the crime sections, and I noticed I was putting people on the shelves that I'd never heard of before. They had actually been commissioned and published in the year that I had been working for Waterstones. I thought, well, if it's that easy to get published...? Again, invincible ignorance, okay? Compared to television, where it's almost impossible to get commissioned unless you are sleeping with a producer or something — and even then it's quite hard — compared to that, it is easier to get published. There's more outlets, more people to send your work to, there's more people who can make a go decision. There's only three people who can actually make a go decision in British television. If none of those three people like you, and they're surrounded by layers of people who just get in the way.

***But in books, there's lots and lots of publishers, and you can also publish yourself now, which is nice.***

I thought, I'll write a book. I looked up and there was the crime, and there was the science fiction. I like both of them equally, and I couldn't figure out which one I wanted to write, so I wrote one that does both, and saved time. I sat down, and rummaged through my brain for the various ideas that had been floating around, because I had twenty years of accumulated good ideas that had not been used on anything, or had been put into abortive script ideas, or had gone down into the development spiral of death. I had quite a few ideas to pick from, and I chose the one that, at the time, was called Magic Cops. It was called Magic Cops up to about five minutes before publication. I mulled that in my head, and suddenly Peter Grant walked into my head and I wrote the first two pages and I looked at it and thought, this is gonna sell. I just knew it would sell. I didn't know it would become a bestseller, but I knew sooner or later someone would buy it.

***One of the advantages of being an experienced writer is you know when you have got something hot. You can feel it, objectively.***

The difference between and that and something I had been writing six months earlier, I could just feel it. Ooh, that works, it's tasty.

***It was just a question of writing it and getting up really early in the morning and writing it and trying to keep body and soul together until I got paid.***

## What was it specifically that gave you that feeling?

It was the voice. The Peter Grant books are written — much to the annoyance of quite a large number of pedants — in the vernacular. You'd be amazed the number of complaints, 'Oh, why does he say "me and"...?' *Because he's written in the vernacular.*

***I'm thinking of getting a t-shirt made with the definition of the word 'vernacular' written on the front and then on the back it would have, 'What I write books in.'***

There was something about his voice. It was just that line, 'I find it helpful to quote the wisdom of my father, who once told me, 'Who knows why the fuck anything happens?'' There's something about the tone of his voice that's good. This is a guy that people are going to warm to, and people will like him and essentially, unless you're writing for the Guardian, or the Telegraph, a character that people like is quite important.

## Can you see yourself writing Peter Grant for the foreseeable future?

This is the only question that I always get asked whenever I do a session, and so I have a stock answer for this now. I will stop writing it if a) it becomes boring for me, and b) people stop reading it, in which case there isn't any point, or c) if I can afford a yacht. And I don't mean a little eight metre ketch, I mean an Abramovich, James Bond villain, yacht with two helicopter landing pads and one of those control rooms that look like you can launch a rocket from it. At that point, I've been informed, I'll probably have to keep writing because buying the actual yacht is the cheapest thing about having a yacht. Running the yacht costs about the same as the price of the yacht every year, as a rule of thumb. The answer is, I probably won't ever stop writing these, until I'm dead. And, unlike people like Ian Rankin and Colin Dexter, I made sure my detective is younger than I am, so I'm not going to have that problem where he reaches mandatory retirement age and I have to have to write that tricky novel where he retires and then somehow comes back to the police force. I'll be dead before that happens. Forward planning!

## Do you write every day?

Yes I do.

## What's your word count every day?

Bad.

## What's an example of bad?

Really bad is no words whatsoever.

## That's not writing every day!

It is writing every day, trust me! You can sit down at the bloody thing and come up with about five words. It counts as no words. Anything under two hundred I don't really count as getting any work done.

## Are they good words?

There's three basic types of writers in my experience, and this is a spectrum, so there are people in-between. There are people that write and revise, and generally I've noticed that people who've trained as journalists are like this, and I hate them. They do 3-4000 words a day and then they cut it down, and revise it and improve the text.

Then there are people like me who are worrying about the 'and'. Hmm... that 'and'... not sure about that 'and'. That makes us very slow, but we don't have to do so much revision, because we're happy with the sentence. If we've written it down, then we're probably happy with the sentence as it is, and we don't revise. There's less wastage.

And then there's people who write fast *and* well, and we just hate them. All other writers hate them and we ostracise them at conferences.

Sarah Pinborough was telling us about the importance of thinking time. Is thinking time important to you?

That's procrastination.

And how are you on procrastination?

I'm excellent. I like to think of myself as one of England's finest procrastinators. Very few people can waste time quite as well as I can. I can waste time in ways that even the cast of Shameless would have difficulty with.

What are your top tips for procrastination?

There's obviously Twitter, which is a good source of procrastination. And I ration myself. I only log on every so often, but I still find myself wasting time. Youtube... The internet, generally, is a huge source of procrastination. Then there's reading research books. Then there's going and looking at locations. Then there's working on another project that's just occurred to you that's got nothing to do with the actual project that you're supposed to be doing at the time. That's my favourite. And then there's watching TV, because you need to input stuff into your brain.

# Looking at locations isn't procrastination, is it? Surely that inspires you?

Yes. You have to go to locations. Research is very important. It makes writing easier. The more research I do, the more going to locations etc, the more easier it is to write, because the words are there, I don't have to make shit up.

***The more stuff that's real the easier it is to write. That's kind of my motto.***

What is procrastination? What is research? I'm a very, very, very slow writer. I don't know anyone as slow as me. I think 500 words a day is fast-paced. My other writer friends just laugh at me. And point. When we have writer get-togethers, they just laugh and point. It's embarrassing.

You need to actually smell the places. This is important. Google Earth will only get you so far, reading about it only gets you so far. You actually have to go and *sniff* the place. I can't explain it better than that. You have to get what it smells like, what it tastes like, and these are things you can't get from visual media. No matter how many documentaries you watch about Morocco, you can't explain what that sand smells like, what a bazaar smells like, what the souk smells like. What does camel shit smell like? I don't know. I've never been near a camel. I would go down to London Zoo and smell a camel, because that's very important. I say that, because I actually did that. I asked if I could go. I didn't stick my nose in its fur, you don't actually have to stand at all close to a camel to get a good whiff. They're very fragrant beasts. A distance is fine, you just have to be downwind of them, really. I went to look at elephants. I can't remember why I had to look at elephants, but I wanted to see how it moved. When you look at an elephant on a video, you think that's a big beast... When you stand next to one, and realise that all it had to do is lean slightly to the left and you're *dead*... it's a completely different experience. To it, I am nothing. I'm like a mouse. Then you get a better idea of what an elephant *really* is... and what they smell like. That's

true of tube trains, and busses, and people, and locations, and rivers, and all the other things that make up a good book.

And you've got to meet a lot of people. This is always a big problem for writers, who are usually introverts, but you have to make yourself go out and meet a wide range of people, and the wider range of people you meet and get to know, the easier it is to write a wider range of people.

***It's one of the issues in writing these days, is diversity in writing without stereotypes, and the easiest way to avoid stereotypes is to get to know a large number of people, and then you won't write stereotypes, because you won't be relying on "received wisdom", you'll be relying on your own experience, which is always much broader.***

You don't have to have a lot of depth, but you need to have a lot of width.

## Any favourite moments of research? Anything that's made you rethink a story?

The nicest surprise came from someone at a signing. A lady came up to me and said, 'My old man was a copper for forty years, and he said he worked with every single one of the coppers in the book.' Everyone from Stephanopoulos, to Peter, to Seawoll... he'd worked with every one of those in his time at the Met. And that was very pleasing, because you worry that when you make up a character like Stephanopoulos or Seawoll that maybe I'm going over the top with this, but that was comforting.

People will describe some police procedure, or you'll be reading the Blackstones Manual For Police — there are all these books for teaching you how to be a policeman — and you'll find the



most wonderful acronyms. I have enormous fun with the acronyms, and the SAD CHALETs and things like that...

(ed: SAD CHALETs is the acronym used to train first responders in the British Police... they also use CHALET and METHANE)

**Survey the scene.**

**Assess the situation and the risk implications.**

**Disseminate information to the correct groups in the correct sequence.**

**Casualties:** Number, type, and condition.

**Hazards:** Types, severity, impacts, and status.

**Access:** Management control points, safe routes in, and reception centres.

**Location:** Specific grid reference or prominent feature of the event.

**Emergency Services:** What support is required?

**Type:** Nature and type of crisis incident.

**Start Logging:** Start collating information from the beginning of the event.

... they give you ideas. They give you forms and explain how the forms work. Thing like the word 'action' and the fact that it's used as a verb: to action, I action, you action... I had a lot of fun with that. All these things are very, very useful.

You watch something like Happy Valley and you realise that it's a very realistic police show, and you watch something like Silent Witness and you go, 'HA-HA-HA-HA! THAT'S SUCH CRAP!' On every level. But with something like Happy Valley or Scott and Bailey you recognise real police work. They make a lot of effort to make it as realistic as possible, which is hard on TV, because

TV's not a very good medium for realism. Policing is all about systems, and systems are boring on TV. That's why scientists are very rarely on TV unless they're cackling.

What do you do when you're writing a book, and you suddenly get another idea? Do you tend to follow it, or do you stick to the plot?

I don't write like that. I very rarely know what the plot is at the start of a book. I usually have a vague idea of what's going to happen. Because I trained as a scriptwriter, I have a scriptwriter's attitude: I'm a four act person. I usually know where the first turning point, second turning point, third turning point is, and I have a rough idea of what they are, and I usually know what the big thing at the end is going to be. What I *don't* know is how I'm going to get to those points.

***What usually happens is I start writing and the characters start going off in all sorts of directions, and I'm going, 'No! Get back in the plot you bastards!'***

Things like characters who I didn't think were going to be characters suddenly turn up. Half the bloody characters that people love now and go, 'Ooh, why can't we have more of this one?' are characters that were just there to do things like open the door, or they were literally the equivalent of those characters in Shakespeare who walk in and go, 'The King is dead!' If you imagine Hamlet, where Rozencrantz and Guildenstern *won't leave the stage*, that's basically my life as a writer. They get on the stage in the middle of Hamlet and go, 'Y'know, we like it here, we like Denmark, we're going to hang about for a bit.' Because of that, and because my characters frequently refuse to do what I tell them anyway, I'm basically just on it for the ride.

You could argue that some of these characters are diversions, aren't they? Is this because you're having so much fun with them that they become something else?

I'm not sure 'fun' is the right word to use. For me, yeah, that's part of the fun of the book. Most people don't read my books for the plot, I think they like the characters, and they like the fun things, and they like the humour. If the plot makes sense at the end that's like a bonus. I like the plot to make sense, I *think* the plot makes sense, but sometimes I get to the end and I think... Okay, that kind of made sense to me, I wonder if it makes sense to anyone else?

***Plotting is very important. There are two components to a book, right? There's the storytelling aspect, and there's the actual prose that you use to tell the story, and the truth of the matter is the storytelling aspect is the most important aspect, for your purposes, for bestselling.***

If you're telling a good story, the prose can be crap. For commercial fiction, story is more important than prose. That's the separation between literary fiction, where you have really brilliant prose, and no story whatsoever. I would worry about the story, and worry about the prose second, if you're *really* cynically trying to get a bestseller.

At this point in the interview, Mr. Stay drops the bombshell that his and Mr. Desvaux's book is fifty-thousand words long... and he makes the mistake of calling it an 'outline'. To say that Mr. Aaronovitch's reaction is apoplectic would be an understatement...

*Your outline is fifty-thousand words long?! Let me stop you there, right. This is your problem. I wouldn't write a five-hundred word outline, for fuck's sake... fifty-thousand words? That's not an outline, that's a form of self-flagellation. Oh, God! You should be able to get the plot points of your novel onto one page of A4. If you couldn't, writing fifty-thousand words isn't going to disguise the fact. One page of A4 as a beat sheet should do it. One page. And then you should start writing the novel, because you guys are procrastinating. You wanna know what procrastination is? A fifty-thousand word outline. Unless your novel is two hundred and fifty thousand words long, you are doing something wrong.*

What's happened is we've started working on the outline, playing with the characters, and we are basically writing the novel...

To quote Yoda, 'Write, or do not write. There is no fucking outline.' You're doing this wrong. Forget the bloody outline. The outline is an illusion. You don't know where you're going. You've spent fifty-

five thousand words on an outline. That is not someone who knows where they're going. That is someone who is waffling to cover up the fact that they don't know where they're going Fifty-five thousand words? Fuck's sake. That's a novella! I just got paid money for that. I would consider fifty-five thousand words a really good six months' work. Bloody hell. I've got friends who would have written a novel by now, and I'm not talking about a short novel. James Swallow would have written a bestselling thriller, and he would have it out by now, and he writes outlines, but not fifty-five thousand word outlines. God's sake, you want my advice? You are wasting time.

***Sit down, start page one, start writing the book. Worry about the end of the book when you get there. When you've got the words under your belt that's when you worry about the end of the book.***

You are getting this all wrong. I'm not biased, but fifty-five thousand words...? That's just appalling. That's just depressing. You guys have got too much time on your hands. You need to get a hobby. Or a full-time job other than the full-time job that you've got. Jesus Christ. Look, George RR Martin, that's about four books of outlines! He would have written the Winds Of Winter by now. It's a psychological thing. The outline is *you* not wanting to start the novel. You guys need to sit down, start writing chapter one. Trust me on this. You will thank me in about a week's time. Come back to me when you've written chapter two.

***When you've written the first twenty-thousand words, you will know you'll finish it. That is the point where most people agree that once you've got about the first ten- to twenty-thousand words then you're pretty certain you're actually going to finish the novel. Before that it's just, 'I've got a novel in me.'***

It doesn't matter how much good stuff is in the outline, it's not in the novel yet. What you're doing is trying to avoid doing the difficult bit, and the difficult bit is 'page one', opening line. That's the bit

that separates 'I've got a novel in me,' from 'I am a writer.' That is the crucial thing. You have to get that first chapter done, because you're just pissing about now.

We then asked Ben our question of the week, which was about the possible harm of writing too many drafts...

Drafts? I feel sorry for this question of the week, because I'm entirely the wrong author to ask that. If you ask my editors that question, they'll get 'Drafts? Ben does drafts?' I don't do drafts. I just about finish it in time for my editor not to send the lynch mob round. And then he sends corrections. There are no second drafts with me. By the time I've finished ninety-six thousand words — which is about what one of my novels is, a nice short novel, and it still takes me the best part of two years to write — I'm so tired of the bloody thing, I never want to see it again. I'm not going to go back and re-write it. Except when someone from outside has demanded it, because the spelling's all messed-up.

Is that why you're a five-hundred word a day man?

No, I think it's because I'm incredibly lazy. I think the causal relationship is the other way round. I'm a five-hundred word a day man, and *that* is why I hate rewriting. I'm not a draft person, some people are draft people. The answer is 'yes'. If you find yourself doing a fourth draft, you've done too many drafts.

## Really? Four is too many?

I would say two, but some people like to redraft. You can redraft, and redraft, but I would submit it. For your first book... There's a difference between that first book you're selling, and what you're doing when you're an established author. For a first book, yeah, four or five drafts. Whatever it takes to get it right. Don't go too mad. If you've done more than four drafts, you have to ask, 'Am I putting off submission?' You nearly always want to go back and chop at least two thousand words out of the first three chapters because it drags. Make sure you've got no spelling mistakes. Someone has to read those first three chapters and not think to themselves, 'Oh my God, my life is over, I want to kill myself out of boredom.'

***You've got to remember that some poor sod has to read this when it arrives at an office. I don't need to tell you this, right? And they're not doing it full of glee. They're not thinking to themselves, 'Yay, another manuscript!' They're thinking, 'Oh, God, this pile of manuscripts that I've got to read on the tube back to whatever Godforsaken suburb that they live in.'***

And on a Kindle, probably, these days. A PDF on a Kindle, that's not even well-formatted. And you had better fucking entertain them in the first two chapters is all I'm going to say, because they're going to go, 'Urgh.' Make sure those first two chapters — at least — are nice and crisp if nothing else. If someone told me, even my fast writing friends, that they were on draft five I would be a bit dubious. Now, once you're a professional writer, that's a slightly different thing. One; you're more experienced, so you draft as many times as you feel is necessary, which in my case is none, because I'm going to hand it over to an editor, who's going to come up with notes. I don't see why I should do their job. What the hell are they getting paid for, y'know? Gillian (Redfearn, Gollancz editor); she's a lovely woman, she gets paid money to edit my work, I don't see why I have to edit it. Anyway, I think it's presumptuous of me to judge what Gillian might want changed. And sometimes you're very close to the work. I actually pay a friend, on a chapter-by-chapter basis, to

edit my work. It's very useful because my grammar is crap, my spelling is terrible, so it's useful to have someone who can spell and do grammar... where the commas go. I'm getting better, but I'm always having a problem with commas. It's not so much that they put them in the right place, it's knowing that they're going to do it stops me from doing that thing where you write a sentence and then go... Does the comma go *there*...? Or does the comma go *there*...? Instead of doing that, I just go, 'Oh, Andrew will fix it.' Actually, Andrew doesn't need to fix it as often as he needed to six books ago. It's like working with a safety net, it's just very useful. And so, therefore, my books are edited as they go along. By me, as well. I go back and I change things. I lose about twenty percent of the prose that I write. I keep track of it. Of my ninety-six thousand words, I lose about twenty-thousands words. Not in big chunks, though. That's the difference; a write and revise person will write a hundred and twenty thousand words and cut out forty-thousand words to make a ninety-six word novel. I will cut out sentences. I will do a bit at the individual sentence level, and then when I add it all up it comes to about twenty-thousand words.

***You have to know Who am I? What is my style? And you adapt your writing technique to the style that you have. In the same way that you have to find your own voice, you have to find your own writing rhythm.***

Some people like to get up in the mornings, some people write at night, some people write in cafes, some people are obsessives, some people write on only one computer facing east... whatever. There is no right way of doing it. Whatever works. Whatever gets the thing done, but... and this is the important thing in your bloody fifty-five thousand word bloody outline... *done* is the word, okay? A fifty-five thousand word outline is *not* done!

Chapter one... ooh, now we're doing chapter two... That's done!

Outline is just pissing about.

Fifty-thousand words is Scrivener's way of telling you, you should be getting on with the bloody novel.



***You don't even know what the characters are like until you've done the serious writing. The outline won't tell you. The outline is the easy bit.***

By definition, all that lovely prose you're writing in your outline, that's the low-hanging fruit. That's not what's going to slow you up. That's not what's going to keep you awake. That's not what's going to have you banging your head gently on the table in front of your computer. It's really stupid things, like you're gonna go, 'How do I get them from this location to that location? What's the fricking transition?' I'm so bored, I can't just go dot-dot-dot.

Can I just give you a word of advice on that one? It's from a Somerset Maugham story. I recite this, it's my little mantra. In one of the stories it goes, 'They went back to the hotel and then next morning...' and I can't remember what they did the next morning, but my point being is you don't have to go back to the hotel, detail what they eat. Have them wake up and go out. You can do that in one sentence. And that's something you can't do in film. You can't do it in radio, you can't do it in comics, but you can do it in prose.

***You can have a seamless thing like that and annihilate time with an 'and', with a conjunction. That's very, very, very, very useful thing to be able to do.***

A lot of your time you'll be trying to get from one scene to another, and actually, all you need to do is, 'And then they went to that place.' That, believe it or not, is what takes all the time. It's things like that. Whether the character's a paranoid schizophrenic with mother issues, right? That's not what takes time when you're writing. Transitions is what takes time. Finding new ways of describing people takes time. Thinking, how do you convey that sensation when you look up at a house and it looks like it's going to fall on your face, without saying that? And then going, 'He looked up at the house, and he had a terrible sensation it was going to fall on his face.' Working your way through that is what's going to take your time, and you guys are putting it off because you

know that. So get on with bloody chapter one! I will be amazed if half the stuff in your outline makes it into novel. You're not going to make your deadline. You're just not.

I'm going to follow you now, and I'm going to Tweet you, 'Have you started chapter one yet? Have you started chapter one yet? Have you started chapter one yet? Have you started chapter one yet?' I can do a bot, y'know? I can do that automatically at intervals until you bloody start.

And then, when you've done that, I'll just change to 'chapter two'. Reset the bot. Seriously, this is the only way you're going to get a book out. I understand the impulse, even though I deplore the motive. You have to get the book written. This is a hard thing, and you are going to have revise it if you want a bestseller. I can tell; you guys are revisers. Get that done. You should be able to write this novel between the two of you in less than three months. How long is it going to be? You don't want it to be too long.

## Between 80-90,000 words.

If you hadn't bothered with the outline, you'd almost be finished by now. Either write the novel, or don't write the novel. There is no fucking outline. Outlines are for producers and television folk.

# Episode 24: Liz Fenwick & The Crows Of Doubt

*Liz Fenwick is the award-winning author of The Cornish House, A Cornish Affair, A Cornish Stranger, Under A Cornish Sky (can you spot the pattern here?) and The Returning Tide (set in Cornwall!). We were delighted to speak to her about positive rejections, the importance of a book's location, how thirty-four drafts helped her learn to write, and her experience with the Cornerstones Literary Consultancy.*

What does a literary consultancy like Cornerstones do?

They can do many things: simple assessments, in-depth assessments, they offer courses and weekends away. What they provide is an editorial service. They try and match what you've written to the right type of editor.

What attracted you to them?

I had reached the point where I was getting very positive rejections. I had full manuscript requests at publishers and agents and they were coming back with lots of lovely comments, but nothing matched. I'd sit there, look at it and think how can I improve if this one says *this* is wrong, and this

one says *this* is wrong? I didn't know where to turn. I looked at it as if you've ever been on a diet and you reach a plateau and you have no idea how to break the plateau, and this seemed to be the best option to get a full manuscript assessment so that I could look at it more logically. Because, as the writer, you're too close.

## How do you keep going after so many rejections, no matter how positive they might be?

You scream, you eat some chocolate, you probably have wine, and you try and glean something out of that you can work with. It became clear that they liked my storytelling abilities, they liked my voice, but something was wrong. They kept saying, 'I would love to see the next work.' So, you go on and you write the next work and I think one of the things that played into the whole publishing and editing thing was when my third book was accepted, the one that went through Cornerstones, I was working on my seventh book.

## We know it's one of the most beautiful places on Earth, but why Cornwall?

Cornwall is my muse. There's something about the landscape. I see stories in the landscape. I also think because Cornwall can never belong to me, I try and hold on to it by writing stories about it. Which I know sounds incredibly weird. My roots are all Irish. The first time I went to Ireland I could feel my roots going down into the ground and I was at one, I was at home in way that I had never been before. When I arrived in Cornwall, I just felt this longing, but my roots just don't go down into the ground, and the only way I can capture that is to write it.

## How long have you lived there? Do you feel part of the community?

I went there the first time in 1989, and I bought a house in '96. My daughter's born there, and she has a Chough on her birth certificate, so one of us belongs. It depends on where in Cornwall you are how receptive the community is to you.

*The area that we live in have accepted me as their token American and writer.*

## What were you writing about before moving there?

## What did Cornwall change about your writing?

If we go back to when I was a child, and I was writing then, it was more a desire to continue stories that I had read, or had been read to me, that desire to keep creating worlds. I went to university and I did my degree in English Literature with a concentration in creative writing and medieval studies. Who knew? And for my senior thesis I wrote a work called *An Irish Woman*, and I wrote three quarters of it. To describe it now; slightly saga-like in a way, but not quite. That was the goal. And my professor gave me her agent's name and told me to send it off and I never did. I started writing fiction again in 2004, I looked up this agent and thought, 'Oh my God, what have I just done?' And my husband optimistically said, 'Send her something now!' And I'm thinking, it's so many years too late to go back and knock on that one, but by then I had grown and the thing is I'm glad I didn't get published at 22, because I couldn't write the books that I really wanted to write, and I didn't have the skin thick enough to take the criticism that comes your way.

*And you get criticism in all directions as writer. Not only do you have it from readers, but you have it from your editors, agents... There's always people coming and saying something's wrong, so you have to be pretty comfortable with receiving that criticism and at 22 I probably couldn't have done it.*

At 22 would you have sought the help of something like Cornerstones?

I didn't even know they existed.

How do the different elements of Cornerstones work?

Are they linked? Does one follow the other?

The retreats, the assessments and the editorial reports are totally separate. When I went on the retreat, I did one on women's fiction with the author Julie Cohen, who is one of the best teachers, and writers, out there that I know. It was more working on overall skill and taking books apart and looking at things that work, from dialogue, descriptions, setting, all those things that make up a novel, and breaking them down. Doing that was a retreat. And also the opportunity to talk to Cornerstones' people about different aspects of your career.

*The most important thing, apart from working on my skills, was the question: which is the book — at that point I had written six books — which is the book to launch you as a writer? And I looked at her, without a question of a doubt, and said, 'The Cornish House.' That*

***really helped me think through, 'I'm a brand, I'm writing about Cornwall, there's something about me,' and so forth.***

That was the novel I then chose to work on, and invest in, because it is an investment. Any time you go to a consultancy, it's not inexpensive, but what you get back, or what I got back, was an in-depth, 28 pages of somebody looking at my manuscript, *and* a marked-up manuscript that had wonderful things in it like, 'This made me laugh... I like this description,' along with the bad stuff. When you're actually published you don't get back the little rub on the back that says, 'This is good'. You only get the list of what you need to fix.

## Were you writing alone, or were you in a group?

It was more like a workshop. We had all submitted work and then what Julie had done was go through it, pick a sample from each of us to demonstrate how things are done well, and how they could be improved. It was definitely learning about your writing and then you had time to go away and think, 'Oh my God, my head is hurting. How do I go back and improve?'

## Did you find you learned a lot from the critiquing?

I certainly did. One of the most important skills you need to acquire is how to be critical of your own work, by listening to other people criticise your work in a civilised environment. It helps you be able to do that. And listening to other writers read their work out and think, 'Actually, this is a bit wordy. There's too much description here...' And then you can immediately turn your eyes to your own and think, 'Oh... damn.' The same faults are there. I just need to fix them.

***I think you have two forms of inner voice: you have the inner critic, which is going to tell you that everything you write is total and utter crap, and then you have what one of my mentors called the inner voice, and that's the one you need to cultivate.***

The inner voice is the one that will tell you that actually what you've written is good, but that thing that's niggling in the back of your mind, that scene that doesn't quite work, *that's* what you need to go in and cut. There was one of those scenes in *The Cornish House* and it had gone all the way through *Cornerstones*, and it had gone through my agent, and it came to the editor, and she had sent me this huge editorial letter, and this scene came up, the one my inner voice had been telling me about. It was really wonderful to sit down with my editor and say, 'These are the things it does, and that's why I need it.' And she said, 'What else can we do?' In the end, the scene that came out of that brainstorming session is probably my favourite in the book.

## It was a question of making it work harder?

Yes, and again, understanding the difference between those two voices that you hear in your head and looks at the pages and goes, 'Oh God, that's such crap,' and then the other voice that says, 'Actually, there's a lot there that's good, but you know this scene that you love? And this prose? Really... it's got to go. You had to write it to get the book done, but just get rid of it now.'



## What advice would you have for those on their first novel and they're wondering if it's worth carrying on?

I think one of the biggest battles, if it's your first book, is completion. If it's not complete, nobody can ever judge it. So that makes it very safe. The thing is, completing a novel is a huge task and, for me, one of the biggest hurdles I had to cross was to complete it and get that done.

***The first thing I would say is complete the novel and know that it's terrible. Just accept that it's terrible. This is the stone from which you carve something decent out of.***

I'm at that stage. I'm in the middle of book six. I'm at the roughly halfway point. The crows of doubt are circling. What was I thinking starting on this ambitious project? Where am I going? What are the motivations? And it's at this point that I have to just say, trust yourself, finish a rough draft.

***You've written this draft for you. Every draft hereafter is for your readers.***

If you do that, you can get beyond yourself. Julie Cohen has this sticker on her computer that says — I'm not going to swear — but, *The First Draft Is Sh\*t*. Just accept that this is nothing but a massive stone for you to carve the story out of.

## Did you decide on the Cornish link very early on?

All my books were set in Cornwall, but it was my editor who, after the first book, decided that we would use Cornwall in the title to brand me. The book that comes out in March is a step away from that. It's called *The Returning Tide*. The feeling is that the reader base has been built and those that are drawn to that will follow me, and we can go to a bigger audience now.

## Does using a location help build a following for a series?

My books are linked, but not a series. They're all set in the same part of Cornwall, so you've got overlapping characters, secondary characters, and readers really enjoy this, but the books are all standalone at the same time. The best marketing tool was the cover of the first book, *The Cornish House*. It was different, it had blue skies and it had the cottage that everybody wanted. So they picked up the book because of the cover.

## How did you end up in Cornwall?

Because of the man who is my husband. The first weekend he brought me down there I thought I was going to meet his parents, but no, I was going down for the Cornwall test. And if I hadn't fallen in love with Cornwall, I don't think we'd be twenty-five years married. There are other places that I've been to where I've felt a very strong pull. Recently I was up in Scotland, and I could see out of the corner of my eye little stories, but it didn't quite move me in the same way. Whereas I can go

walk the cliffs, I can go into the woods, and I see things... not literally, but I feel them and see them in my mind.

## Rumour has it, you love a bit of a rewrite. Is that true?

I'm getting better. The least I've done is four. The most I've done is thirty-four. It was *A Cornish Affair*, the second book, which was written before *A Cornish House*, and that was the book that I learnt on.

***I did write my soul out of that book. But each rewrite I was learning new skills.***

I would write a book, then I would rewrite another book, and I'd go back and rewrite the other two. Because, with each book that I wrote I gained so much more knowledge. *A Cornish Affair* went through so many transformations and my editor at the time said she liked the concept of the story and wanted that for book two. I thought, first of all, I need a major rewrite here because it needs to be in first person. So, that was huge, and I had not written in first person before. At that time there was a ghost in the story and I was keeping him in third person, but she said no, I think you really need to have him in first person. It's too jarring to have the two different things. Oh, great.

***It's one thing to write in the third person about a Victorian ghost, that's a boy, that's thirteen years old, but it's another thing to do it in first person.***

At least in third person there's a little bit of separation. I could do a modern thirteen-year-old boy, because I had two of them in the house at the time. So, I really struggled with that. I read Dickens, and I don't like reading Dickens. I like *listening* to Dickens, but not reading him. It just wasn't working, so I then cut him out of the story. That's a huge, whole plotline. What am I going to do? Fortunately, my editor was on holiday down in Cornwall and came to visit, and so I sent her

husband and my husband off in a boat with the kids, and I walked her along the Helford River, and I explained all my problems, and she said you've obviously got to do that. I then cut seventy-thousand words from the story (out of) ninety-five thousand.

## How different was the thirty-fourth draft to the first?

The basic premise of the story, and the themes of the story, were exactly the same. The key characters, bar the ghost Toby — whom I loved and some day I will resurrect my ghost — were all there. I learnt so much through that. One of the things I want to say is, when I went to go into first person I went back to my fourth draft, because I had realised I had written my voice out in the ensuing drafts, and took that as the draft to rewrite into first person. So don't throw out anything.

## How long did this all take? Months? Years?

The rewriting? I was probably on draft twenty-nine when my editor said she wanted it. I wrote the first draft in 2005, and this was published in 2013. It was a very tight timeframe because I was on a book a year, so to try and delete seventy-thousand words, rewrite, and then I had all her edits, which involved a lot of major rewrites, which brought me up to thirty-four. I had done major rewrites having been through the Cornerstones process. Through their editorial letter I had done a major rewrite at that point.

## Are the writers at Cornerstones all working on finished books?

They're on different levels. I think they (Cornerstones) offer the opportunity to have mentoring, and brainstorming, but I would say, from my perspective, that it's a waste of time unless you've at least completed one draft, if not two, before you go in there. What was extraordinary was that when I did the Robert McKee Story course the first time, there were two girls sitting behind us and they had never written anything more than three chapters. I thought, what a huge investment to make on something that you haven't completed, and to get the most out of a seminar like that it's great to have a current book in your head because the electrons start popping and you think, 'Oh my God, I need to do this! And that's why it doesn't work.'

## What advice would you have when the writing isn't flowing smoothly?

You're in your first draft, so what I would say to you is, and in fact it's something that I've done intuitively... Listening to Patrick Gale down in Penzance last week, he handwrites in the front of a notebook, and in the back of the notebook he puts his research and his questions that come up. He calls it his quarry. I keep a notebook going in my first draft, for when I think this doesn't work, or I write directly into the manuscript, 'This is a load of crap,' or, 'This is what needs to happen right now, and I need to see this whole plotline in at the beginning.' End bracket. Then go on. Because, if I stop at this point I'm not going to meet my deadlines.

It's very difficult, but if you intend to finish this book by the end of the year I would say get your first draft done. It is not that difficult. It's painful, but it's not that difficult. I use the knitting analogy. Suddenly you're three quarters up the front half and you realise you've dropped a stitch down at the bottom, and you have to go down and... you either rip the whole thing out, which I don't recommend — y'know, deleting seventy-thousand words — or, you carefully thread that piece through. It can be done.

***I think editing is the worst and the best bits about writing, because I can write anywhere. First draft; anywhere. Doesn't matter. I can be on a plane, my kids can be around. Whatever. Doesn't matter. But for editing I need headspace, because every change you make affects something else in the story.***

So, I need a clean desk. I need no noise. And that's when I go in. But that's when the story comes alive. That's when all the things that you've left out, like... I do only enough research to write the first, and I leave lots of big exes in there, knowing I'll come back.

***And it's in the research that you'll get the twists and the turns and everything else. Expecting it all in the first draft, particularly if it's the first time you've done a complete book, is too much.***

On A Cornish Stranger I thought the historical element for the ninety-two year-old — she was going to be involved in the SOE (Special Operations Executive) — so I thought I'll be really good at this. I did *loads* of research, and three quarters of the way through the first draft I thought this isn't going to work. So I had to shove all of that out the door. And that was bye-bye time, bye-bye everything. Unless you are very much a plotter and know exactly where you are going, which I'm not, then it's best to do only enough research to get that first draft down.

# What's your routine like?

You've read the wonderful Stephen King book *On Writing*? I laughed like a loon when I read it. Particularly that wonderful scene — it's a brilliant book, don't get me wrong, I absolutely loved it — but he talks about going into his office, looking at the blank wall, and staying in there until the words come and everything else and I thought... the man has a wife. Who does the laundry? Who does the grocery shopping? Who picks up the kids from school? That's all very nice to think about, but I've learned to write as and when I can. As I say, a first draft I can write anywhere, anytime in any amount of time. When I started writing again I was tied to the school run. A great discipline. It was my youngest — she was in reception — and I'd be there on this little netbook, in the car, waiting for pickup. I had three hours when she was in school. Then there was getting there, groceries and everything else had to be acquired in that time. I'll never forget, the first complete book when I started writing again, I tried write a Mills & Boon, because I thought this would be really easy to do... huh!

***I remember sitting there at the dining room table, two boys doing homework, the youngest kind of running riot, and there I am writing a sex scene. I thought, if I can do this while answering times tables questions and everything else... Like I said, editing is another story.***

You're the second author to tell us she tried writing a Mills & Boon. Michelle Paver tried the same thing. It's not easy, is it?

To write fifty-thousand words, which seems very manageable, about two people not getting together, then getting together, and having legitimate reasons to keep them apart, is very difficult, so my hat goes off to anyone who can do that.

Liz's twenty minute tip:

I honestly feel that if you have twenty minutes a day — truly, twenty minutes — that's your time, you can write a novel in a year. I'm not saying edit it, I'm not saying anything else, but you can get the words down, the complete novel, in twenty minutes (a day).

***When I'm blocked, sometimes I put an egg timer on and say I'm going to write for twenty minutes and only twenty minutes.***

By the time that thing goes ping there'll be sometimes one hundred words, sometimes as many as fifteen-hundred words, because by giving myself that time it takes the pressure off. It doesn't have to be perfect. It's the being perfect that stops most people, and, let's be honest, even when it goes to publication, if you handed a book back to me I'd still be fixing it, I'd still be editing it.



My kids are now big and ugly, so they're not really a problem, but when they were small I think the most challenging thing was when I started writing again and we had the desktop. And all of us were on it. They were wanting to do their games and everything else. The best Christmas present I ever had — and there wasn't a lot of money around — was when they were all excited and they handed me my own laptop on Christmas morning. And it was like, we believe you can do this, mum. One of the things about that whole striving to do this is they were behind me. I wasn't trying to hide away that mummy's trying to write a book. And it's a long process. I started writing fiction again in 2004, I got my agent and publisher in 2011, and I was published in 2012. It's not a short period, and I wrote a lot of books in that time and I really made use of it. I remember one summer, as part of the Romantic Novelists' Association, if you're part of the writer's scheme you have to produce a book a year and it has to be critiqued by another writer. And I was facing the deadline. It was August, we were in Cornwall, we had one week of sun. I was on deadline, so the kids didn't get out of the house, and at the end of the summer I said, 'Do you want me to stop writing?' And the eldest said, 'Mum, no, that's not what we want... we want you to be better at time management.'

## Are there any other inspirational books that you would recommend?

I'm a firm believer that the right book falls in your hand at the right time. A bit like Stephen King. The first time I picked it up (Stephen King's *On Writing*) it didn't grab me. It was probably another year and a half before I picked it up and it was the right time for me to read that book. One of the lovely rejections I got was from Lucy Whitehouse who was working for (agent) Darley Anderson, and she had read *A Cornish Affair*, and rejected it beautifully. She said you really need to pick up Sol Stein's Solutions For Writers. Lightbulb moments everywhere. But now, where I am, what I live for, is Inside Story: The Power Of The Transformational Art by Dara Marks. It's taking McKee to the next level. It's not looking just at structure it's looking at why screenplays fail, because they've got

too many car chases and they haven't looked at the emotional journey. If you haven't done Story, if you haven't done Save The Cat, this is too sophisticated. You need to get the whole concept of Story, Save The Cat and beats and that stuff in your head, and then this takes it to the next level. Before I start a book, I read, and at the middle of the book when the crows of doubt are circling, you can see them around my head right now because I'm at the fifty-thousand word mark and I'm thinking 'Oh my God, where am I going with this?' I pick it up and I read it again. I look at my character's motivations and see what I'm doing. When I revise I pick up Donald Maass's Writing The Breakout Novel Workbook. I randomly pick exercises out of the back and rewrite scenes. Normally, that's how I warm up as well. I just open the book to any old page, 'Oh, there's an interesting exercise. Right.' Open the manuscript to a certain page and do that. Then I have something in my head as I'm going through.

You're halfway through book six. Did you ever imagine there would be a book six?

No, I don't think you get thinking beyond your first contract. And that was for two books. You think, here's one, I've got to do something about the second. Then suddenly you've got another one, and another one, and another one, and... you go on. I like telling stories.

# Episode 25: Shannon Mayer - The

## M Word

*We welcome back Shannon Mayer for the third and final part of our epic interview with her and we finally tackle something that can put the fear of death into many authors... Marketing.*

### Writing is only half the job for you, isn't it?

The biggest thing is that this is a business and needs to be treated as such, which means you have to understand the marketing side of things in order to make it work. One of the things I learned very early on when I was studying the industry was you should be building your platform two years before your book ever hits the shelves. I took that to heart, because I didn't have any books out, and I made a little Facebook fan page and I started to blog, and I did what I could at the time. I started on Twitter, all these little accounts. It taught me something right there. I saw that advice repeated over and over again, and it stuck with me that this marketing side of it is important.

*Because I had my own business in the past — shoeing horses, which is very different, but it's still client-based — I understood that I had to find ways to reach new clients.*

I started to pay attention to the industry, I started to read articles, I started to pay attention to other authors who were doing very well. And, where I could network with them, I started to ask them questions and that was where I started to understand the marketing side of things.

## How do you split your time between writing writing and marketing?

Probably close to fifty-fifty. Some days I might spend all day writing, but then the next day I may spend the whole day marketing. What has to be done with the marketing usually has to be done within a very short period of time, whereas the writing I can move around. I might write at 11 o'clock at night till 2 or 3 in the morning, depending on scheduling.

## You're a night writer?

It depends. I have a little guy who's two years old, so it depends on how he's sleeping. Sometimes I get up early, 4.30-5 o'clock, and I'll write during that time period. I'm all over the map. Whenever I have time, that's when I write.

## You must have incredible time management.

One of the things I've learned as a business owner running my own small publishing house is that I can't do it all by myself, so the trick is to hire people and work with people who can do things better than you. I have a phenomenal assistant. She runs most of my marketing and PR, she runs my newsletter. She's my right hand gal, and probably without her I might die. I also have childcare lined up for my little guy. My husband has his own small business that he runs, so I can call on him, but the trick really is to hire people who can do it. I can all the marketing and PR, I know how to do

all of it, but I'm not quick at it, and I know there are other people who can do it better. The reality is that what I'm good at is writing.

## You must have had to do the marketing when you were starting out?

Absolutely. And that's what I mean, I can do it all. If my assistant left me I could pull up my boots and I could do all of the stuff that I used to, it would just eat up a huge amount of my time. In terms of starting off with marketing, a Facebook fan page, I find that, for me, a lot of my readers hang out on Facebook. It used to be Twitter was a really big thing. I've found that there's been a marked drop off in terms of connections made there. Now you'll see Tweets about, 'Buy my book, my book's on sale, free book,' and that's not marketing, that's just advertising. It's two different things. Pinterest is another thing that's growing. Having your own newsletter list. There's multiple ways to grow that newsletter list. Understanding and learning how to run Facebook ads. If you're really clever and know how to do Google ads, for some authors that's a great venue to be bringing in the marketing. And then recognising that part of your marketing is being engaged in social media with your readers. Readers talk, readers become part of your marketing machine, if you will, because they will say, 'I had this five minute conversation in private messages with Shannon and she gave me some insight into some part of the book that I didn't understand.' Then they tell their friends, who think that's odd for an author to actually interact personally. They really like it. That's one of the big changes in the industry.

## How do you deal with that when your fanbase gets really big?

For me, a huge number of my readers are on Facebook, and so they go to my fan page and they leave comments and I do try to answer all of them, if not, almost all of them. Every genre has a different type of reader, I've found that if you're a heavy romance reader you're much more interested in that everyday interaction with that romance author that you like. They have a much larger number of potential readers in that fanbase. Because I'm in a niche market, I have great, loyal fans, but they're not necessarily looking to interact with me on a daily basis. I do have some that I've developed friendships with and I really enjoy speaking with them and they message once in a while, but not to the degree that other authors will see.

***You have to decide for yourself, as an author, at what point you can no longer answer messages and emails, because there does come that point where there's not the time in the day anymore.***

## What piece of marketing makes the biggest difference for you?

Growing my newsletter list is really important. That's the one thing that, no matter what changes in the industry, that's yours. Those are your readers, those are your fans. Let's say Amazon changes their algorithms, or the way they sell books, and you can no longer reach readers the way you were able to reach them yesterday on Amazon, but you still have your newsletter list. It's a great safety net, and I think it's a really great way to keep in contact with your readers, and for them to

be able to see what's going on. I feel that a lot of readers don't recognise when a new book is coming out. I have some authors that I absolutely love, and quite often I only check in with them every six months, 'Oh my goodness, they've got six new books out,' and I go grab them. But, if I was on a newsletter list, I'd be more up to date on those sorts of things.

## How do you keep people engaged with the newsletter?

My newsletter list has been built a few different ways. One is just kind of organic. There's always links in the back of my eBooks people can click on and sign up right away. In some cases there's exclusive content offered, if they sign up at the end of certain books. In other cases I've given away free eBooks to help just give them an option to meet me as an author and see if they like what I'm putting out there. I always have on my website an option for them to sign-up organically.

## A lot of this sounds technical and could be baffling for some authors. What advice can you give for anyone having doubts about their ability to do this?

It's the foundation of my business. You take the time to figure out how to do it. I would die without my assistant. She's fantastic, and I keep saying that because I want her to hear this and stay with me forever. I learned all of those steps in the beginning. I learned how to build a blog, which you can do through various sites quite easily nowadays. I learned how to use Twitter, I learned how to run a Facebook fan page, and while she does those things for me now, it's important to learn that

from a business standpoint. You want to be able to correct them, if you have help, but also because nothing is forever. Pick one thing. Learn how to do a Facebook fan page, and start building that and that's what you learn for the next few weeks. Pull up a blog and learn how to run a blog, writing articles, and building a fanbase there. You don't have to it all at once. I didn't. It looks like I've done it all at once because I've only been writing full time for three years, but prior to that I was learning the industry, I was learning how to run Twitter, I was learning how to write blogs that were more interactive, I was learning how to network with other authors in order to help each other build fanbases.

***It's a process. It's not something you're going to learn overnight. It's a long race, not a short jump.***

## Can you remember the first day someone signed-up to your newsletter?

It was probably my sister! I really enjoy the marketing now. I enjoy the brainstorming of coming up with new ideas to reach new readers. I enjoy looking at where I was to where I am now, and that growth period, and how can we continue to grow? Such a huge part of this business *is* business. I've always enjoyed stretching that side of me to see what else I can accomplish. I always set goals that, to other people, may sound ridiculous, but if you set those high goals you have a chance of hitting them, and if you miss them, you won't miss them by much, and you certainly aren't going to hurt yourself by making those steady, growing goals. Just do a little bit whenever you can. You learn it, and it'll get easier and you'll start to enjoy it.



# Would you be bold enough to say that without the marketing, you'll never have a bestseller?

In the indie world, I agree. I know several authors who are far above me in talent. I've read their books, they're phenomenal, very well-written, well-edited, great cover art, but marketed terribly. They cannot find a bestseller list for the life of them, and you can only help people so much. In one case, they refused to work on weekends. I think that's great, but the reality is I work seven days a week. I don't take days off. It's actually very difficult for me. If I take days off, I get a little squirly.

***This is not a normal job. You're not going to get Monday to Friday, nine-to-five. You're going to get twenty-four-seven, fifty-two weeks out of the year, you're going to work on Christmas.***

Holidays come up and everybody says, 'Why is it so busy? It's Monday,' and I'm thinking, 'Yeah, why is it so busy? Oh! It's a holiday.' I don't recognise those things anymore. There's a lot of authors out there, with a lot of talent, and a lot of great stories, and they're just sitting in mediocrity in terms of sales because they can't find their footing in the marketing side of things.

I have a couple of really great Facebook groups, with a number of other very successful indie and hybrid authors, and what I enjoy most about those groups is seeing that I'm not the only weirdo working that hard. These authors are on vacation, they're on the beach in Mexico or Hawaii, and they've got their laptop on their lap while their kids are playing in the surf. They're sitting in a Starbucks in a city where they've gone to visit family, and they've gotten away from their family to work. There's just no stop in it.

***For those who want the success and who want to break out, they find a way.***

# Episode 26: Lucy Vine and Katie Seaman - Author & Editor In A Hot Mess

*Lucy Vine is a freelance journalist who has written for pretty much every magazine on the stands, including Grazia, Heat, Cosmo, Stylist and Marie Claire. Inspired by one of Lucy's articles, editor Katie Seaman commissioned Lucy to write HOT MESS, a full-length novel, in an incredibly short space of time and, between them, have discovered a brilliantly efficient way of working together. But first, we had to ask the question...*

## What is a Hot Mess?

Lucy: Most women I know! (She) likes to get drunk, sleeps too much, watches terrible telly and eats badly. Being a Millennial, I think, at this point. Not having any money ever, trying to survive.

## How long did it take you to write?

Lucy: It all started with Katie, at the end of August. I was shifting at lots of different magazines at that point, so she commissioned me to write this book, and I took two months off. So... I wrote it in those two months.

## Two months?! (followed by much wailing in astonishment)

Lucy: Because I'm trained as a journalist, and I've spent however many years doing that, I get given a deadline and I write it, and I've always preferred that overnight commission, where somebody said, 'I need a thousand words in the morning,' and I get up at 4am. I hadn't written a book, even though I'm writing every day and I'm a huge book person as well, but the idea of actually putting myself through the hell of writing a book and then having to pitch and get all that rejection, it just... I know that's what a lot of people are doing, but I've always been too much of a coward for that. It just terrified me, the idea of having to do all that, and the idea of having a whole year as well. When I get given a commission to write something and they say, 'Yeah, give it to us in a month,' I don't do it until that last few days of the month. I actually had a longer deadline (for the book), it was due in January, and I sent it over at the end of November, but I just needed to do it. That first week when I'd actually taken the time off work and I was at home and I was sitting there, ready to write a novel, with a blank piece of paper in front of me, I actually failed a bit, in my head, and just started to panic and I think I had lunch with Katie on the Wednesday of that first week, and I said to you, 'Can I please have a weekly deadline?' I know that sounds a bit pathetic, but I said is it okay if I start sending you ten thousand words a week?

## How many?!

Lucy: Those first few days, I just lay there in my room, just watching Netflix... You think it's impressive, how many words I got through, you should see how many Netflix shows I got through. I knew I had to do that, every Friday, send Katie that chunk of work, I just had to do it. Even if I got to Wednesday and I had to get it done, so I did.

## What was the reasoning behind the two month deadline?

Katie: A Hot Mess is most of us out there, thinking about where we thought we'd be in ten years' time. Are we measuring up to those standards? We're probably all falling short and feel like we're failing. It felt very topical, and there's a lot of shows out there, Fleabag and Girls especially, are really highlighting every day flawed-but-relatable characters.

***Because this felt so timely, we felt we were on the crest of a wave, so we wanted to be in that moment, rather than two years down the line, thinking, 'Oh well, Girls was great when it finished...'***

## Was it a case of you having a zeitgeist idea and then going and looking for the right author?

Katie: I was Lucy's article that inspired the idea. Big shout out to Stylist, because I love their features, and it was around Valentine's Day last year, and you'd written an amazing piece, and it had some stats in there about the amount of people that are single that would choose to stay single, this was when Girls was in full swing, there'd been a renaissance of modern rom-coms on Netflix, shows like Love had just started. So that got me thinking: if I'm out there reading this, how many other women are thinking that maybe, in books especially, there's not the kind of characters that they can relate to? I reached out to her thinking she's probably already writing a book, and I

was so surprised that nobody had ever approached her. It was such an obvious fit to my mind. We met and chatted.

Lucy: I got this email out of nowhere. I thought it was spam. I had a Google of you (Katie). It was so out of the blue, just a few days before my birthday, and it was just so exciting, but at the same time I didn't tell anybody. You know how you hear about L.A., and everybody's telling you *Oh my God, you're gonna be such a huge success!* and I thought it was maybe like publishing people went around fishing like that...? We met for breakfast the next morning, and you seemed like, *Let's do it.* I still feel like it's a joke and I didn't really tell many people about it, till it was announced a few weeks ago in The Bookseller.

***You said to go away and write down a quick brief of what the plot would look like, which I did that week, and then I wrote two chapters, about five thousand words, and then you away and got it all approved.***

And that was when I went to the people I was booked into and said, 'I'm taking the next couple of months off.' Because I'm freelance, it wasn't a big deal, it's more that I just... let them down! Betrayed them and left them in the lurch... It was fine, they managed to find someone to take over for me. I didn't think I'd be back before Christmas, but I did, because I went a bit crazy being in my house for two months. I'm quite a high-functioning introvert, I think. I like people, and I like being around people, but then I really need to just go home and be alone. I've got my own flat, and I live on my own, I shut the door, turn off my phone, it was so exciting to me that I had two months to not see anyone, and not talk to anyone, and just be alone and write. It's just the dream, isn't it? I'm so lucky that I was able to do that. I find that when you're writing that other people are an inspiration. I spent a long time doing market research, as it were, towards writing about being single and that kind of novel, but I did still need other people a bit.... eventually.

## To write that quickly, were you drawing a lot on your personal experience?

Lucy: To some extent. I'm a bit of afraid of this, because I think a lot of people in my life think that it is... My mum keeps saying, 'Oh, you!' She read it at the weekend and said, 'It's really sad about your mum,' and I was, like, 'No! It's not me!' To a certain extent it is a little bit drawn from my life. I've been single on-and-off for five or six years, I don't have a problem with being single, I love it, it's the pity from other people that I can't stand. You don't know how often I'm at a party and some guy says 'Is your boyfriend here?' and I'm, like, 'No, I'm single,' and they do the head-tilt and say, 'Don't worry, babe, it'll happen for you.' I'll say I'm really happy being on my own, it's my choice, I love it, I like my own company, and he'll go, 'Aww, don't worry, it'll happen.'

Katie: This is so true. It does happen. I'd meet the friend of a friend and their first question was, 'Who are you? What do you do?' Second question, 'Why don't you have a boyfriend yet?' Third question, 'When you get married, will you move out of London so you can raise your children?' This is why this book is so pertinent, it's so relatable. I feels like we are stuck in a time warp sometimes, that this kind of official life plan, and these are the standards that a lot of women are being held to. It's so refreshing. We didn't have to apologise, or defend our life choices. This is a really positive story.

You seem to know who you're writing it for. Did you have that very clear in your head?

Lucy: It is that old thing of *Write what you know*, and lots of people who've read it have said, 'That's exactly what happened... have you stolen that from my life?' I think it's just such a universal experience as a single woman. We're used to the same Tinder dates, the same reactions, the same family all having babies. My sister has has three kids, there's this measure of where my life should be and where I actually am. I'm happy with it, and she's happy, and it works, and it's all good, but there's this weird pity.

Let's talk about the editing process. Katie, how were you involved in the two months?

Katie: What Lucy did really well, and here's a general tip, she was aware of what would be her own pitfalls. Us coming up with the weekly deadline was the thing that made it feasible, because she knew that if she was just told to go away and write, it probably wouldn't have happened. Writing's quite different from other industries, even journalism, because you write an article and get immediate feedback, that's one thing you might find quite tricky, because (when you're writing a novel) you're not getting that immediate feedback, and it's solitary. So when you said, 'I need a weekly deadline, this is how I do it,' that's what we decided.

***Lucy would have a weekly working pattern, and she would do Monday-Friday, work throughout that week, and deliver on Friday, and then I read as we went along, I would read at the weekend and get back to her on Monday.***

More often than not it was just reassurance, a lot of my emails to you on that Monday were just you're doing great, this is amazing, this is so funny. It was such a fun read, and it never felt like work, and I couldn't wait for the next instalment and neither could everyone in the office. I didn't give that much detailed feedback, but there were a few things, where I flagged that this might need tweaking slightly, but I think it was just giving that reassurance through the process.

## What was that like for you, Lucy?

Lucy: Writing a book is such a weird mixture of having all the ego to believe in what you're doing, and having no ego, because you then have to let it go, hand it over, and say, do what you need to do. I feel like I've been training in that as a journalist for all these years. I really liked it. I don't think it would be the way for everybody to do it, but it worked really well for us.

## Because this originated with an article, why did you go for fiction instead of non-fiction?

Katie: I think there are a lot of books out that are feminist memoirs, some great books, I just felt that there was a gap in what I could read. I could think of five or six TV shows I could go and watch and recommend to my friends, and increasingly a number of films. I just felt in fiction, some of the old cliches and tropes we've mentioned, about pitying looks when you're single, it felt that things



hadn't moved on that much from some other notable characters, and there was a bit of a gap. So that's why I thought fiction, and Lucy had a great voice, and that's what stood out in the article.

***We met and we chatted and drew up the basic overarching plan of the novel together, so every week I would know what was coming.***

Is Lucy unusual in that, as a journalist, she's more accepting of editorial notes than other authors?

Katie: I'm still quite young, as an editor, and because it was new to both of us, you kind of learn as you move along. I think that's why we got into our own pattern and we made our own routine, and it was having the immediacy of feedback and reassurance — which I think most authors aren't able to get — I think this has been collaborative all the way along and always been a very open door policy if you were struggling, just drop me an email and we'll talk it through. I think it's really interesting what Lucy said about those niggling doubts.

***I would definitely say to people, listen to your gut feeling, because if you have a niggle yourself, then it's something that somebody else might pick up on. If you know it's not quite right, then somebody else will feel the same way.***

The biggest tip that anyone could take from Lucy's writing is that it's much easier to work with what you've written. The worst thing is having a blank page. That discipline of making yourself sit down and write, even when you're finding it tough, you've got words on a page. It doesn't matter how rough and ready a first draft is, you've got something, and you've done it. I think that's such an important step, and such an achievement in itself to get those words and translate that onto the page.

## What are the top pitfalls you find as an editor?

Katie: I'm still learning as an editor, and as you go along you get to read so many different books, and no writers the same, that's what so special and unique. I think probably one of the biggest pitfalls is procrastination. I'm sure, as I writer I can imagine that's probably the hardest thing to overcome, because it's very solitary. Whereas, if you're a standup comedian and you go to the pub and you get an immediate reaction, and having that lack of reaction is probably one of the hardest things to overcome.

Lucy: You've got that with each other. It's a bit like me and Katie having a writing partnership in the same way that you guys have, you can read each other's work and help each other that way. When I write my next one I'll need a bit more contact with other people, obviously I've got Katie, she's all I need, but that contact with other people really helped.

## Would you do the two month thing for the next book?

Lucy: Yes! I'm definitely going to do that. I want to try and beat my own time! It's so important for me to have that breakdown ready. In the beginning I planned out each chapter, so I didn't come to a chapter and go, 'Oh, what happens now?'. I know you guys have done a very detailed outline...

## We're not talking about that anymore... It's verboten...

Lucy: I know he (Ben Aaronovitch) gave you a really hard time, but I really live by an outline now. When I was coming to writing the book, and we had discussed it, and we had decided on the

outline, everywhere I was going, waking up at night, jotting down quick ideas. It's on your mind all the time. I made so many notes on my phone all the time, and I had twelve different chapters in different word documents open at any one time...

## At this point we pause to scold Lucy for not using Scrivener...

Lucy: I know! What was I thinking? Sometimes I'd get a big idea for chapter ten and I'd start writing chapter ten, then I'd go back. I kept thinking I would find my rhythm and I never did! I also found, for the first few weeks when I was writing, every single day I was starting again. Which doesn't work for me so well. I think the first half of the book isn't as good as the second half — I know I'm not supposed to say stuff like that — but I actually think the second half is quite good.

***I just think too many drafts and too many rewrites kill the book.***

I found I was rewriting the first half way more, because every morning I would start at the beginning, re-read, rewriting as I went, and obviously the more I wrote, the harder and longer that took, so I got to halfway through the book and realised I couldn't keep doing that. I then just started writing a bit more fluidly, and I think too many rewrites means you start being a bit clumsy with your words, and sentences start getting jammed together in an awkward way.

Is that something you do as a journalist?

Lucy: Yes, and it's easier when you've got a thousand words. I had to stop doing that, and I won't do it so much. It's like a warm-up, but you can't do that when you've got sixty-thousand words, you can't keep reading the beginning over and over again.

With *Hot Mess* you're ahead of the curve trend-wise, what would you say about spotting trends? With your next book are you looking for the next *Hot Mess*?

Lucy: I don't know if it's about specific trends, because you're not (writing) a magazine. It's about sensing the conversation, and Katie mentioned things like *Fleabag* and *Girls*, so there is something zeitgeisty about being single, but that's a huge subject and it's gonna be forever a subject. We'll hopefully improve a little bit in the way that we treat single women, but I still think it's going to be continually treated as some kind of limbo state. *Bridget Jones*, twenty years ago, it's still the same kind of conversation we're having. The way we treat single girls as freaks, so that's always going to be a forever topic. In twenty years this person can still be writing about being single if they want to. I swear by magazines and newspapers, and they are very much in the zeitgeist, but I don't think books can be in the same way.

***They can talk about universal themes, about life, and if you can tap into life in that way and figure out what people think and talk about, then that's great.***

Katie: This is very topical, to talk about trends. Being aware of them is a good thing, because if you're currently writing a psychological thriller and they're books that are really popular right now, it's really having a moment and continues to do so. I think if you're aware of trends, that's good for your own writing, so you could be aware of competing authors, and if you know there are books like yours out there already, then that's great, because it shows there's appetite, and people will want to read this.

***But then think of how you can make your book slightly different. What's great about Hot Mess, we identified a bit of a gap in the market. As a reader if you think 'What would I like to read, but I can't find a book on this?' maybe that's a book you could think about writing.***

## Writers need to think like the readers?

Katie: Selfishly, this book came from 'What would I like to read?' and maybe that's my ignorance, and I apologise if there's someone out there that has written something and I've not managed to find it, but this is a book that I know I'm going to recommend to everyone.

***As an author, don't forget why you're doing this in the first place, and it's probably stemming from your love of reading, I think that's a really important thing to bear in mind.***

Lucy: If you're trying to write something because you think it's going to fill a hole or follow a trend, then it's probably going to fall a bit flat, because I think if you're not writing about what you are interested in... you've got to write what you want to write about.

# Episode 27: Jo Ho - From Script, To Screen, To Book

*Jo Ho is an award-winning screenwriter and director, best known for creating the BBC TV series Spirit Warriors, but she has recently turned her hand to self-publishing with great success. The first book, Wanted, is a YA thriller, and her suspense novella The Boy Next Door was a Kindle bestseller. We caught up with her in a South London cafe in a break between her many writing projects...*

## We started by talking about The Boy Next Door

It's a sweet story that I originally wrote and tried to get made as a short film, but I couldn't get funding for it, so I adapted it and changed it around a bit, and I actually prefer it more now, in this incarnation, than as a short film.

## How did you start out as a screenwriter and get your own TV series?

I wrote a feature script, and it was a personal story called Monkey Nut Tales, and it was a magical realism drama. It stars three Chinese women, one of whom is only ten, and the middle one is

mentally ill, then the grandmother is 65 and doesn't speak English... So you can see how this had blockbuster written all over it!

***I knew it was going to be a hard-sell, but it was a personal story, it was something I really cared about.***

It dealt with mental illness, and health, and how the Chinese community views it, but was a lovely, lovely story and I wrote it, and got that in the hands of someone quite big at the BBC. I had been trying to get into the BBC via the normal routes like through the Writers' Room, any kind of schemes and competitions, and nobody was interested, but I knew I had something and I was determined that somebody would look at it. I managed to get it in the hands of Ruth Caleb, she was the first female to run a drama department at the BBC, and she's awesome, and she loved it, and she recommended me to all the drama departments at the BBC. For me, trying so hard to get meetings at the BBC — *Please talk to me!* — she just basically said to them you need to talk to this girl. I think when Ruth says that, people listen. I was really lucky and met with all the departments. They all read and loved the script.

## How did you make contact with Ruth? Was that via an agent?

There was some kind of scheme, a development scheme, that I got onto, and she was one of the guest speakers there. I'm one of those annoying people, in that I'm always looking for opportunities.

***Everyone there is interested in finding talent, but you just have to approach them in the right way. You don't lie to them and you don't big yourself up, you just tell them the truth,***

***tell them who you are, be genuine and honest, and I've found that's got me into lots of places.***

That got me into Miramax - just from being honest and cold-calling. I'm very American in how I do things. I hope I'm not abrasive. My family are immigrants. We didn't have any money, and it was a struggle, and my parents didn't even finish school, so it's been real hard graft trying to get here, and I've not had any help, or luxury, or any security really. When your life is literally on the line and rent has to be paid or you'll be homeless, that really puts it in perspective. So, when you talk to people, they can see that you're genuine, that you're really wanting this, and that you're working for this, and you're trying to everything you can, but everybody needs some help sometimes.

***Everybody just needs a break, but to get there you gotta ask for it. No one just comes up to you and says here's your chance.***

I think also learning as much as you can, saying will you look at what I've written already, I've done the research on you, on your company, I've seen the kind of stuff you make, I think you might like this, would you please just have a look?

## And where do you find out about the development schemes to meet these people?

I was on a lot of forums online. There were things like [mandy.com](http://mandy.com), all these websites where you can search for opportunities in the film industry. Admittedly, they're few and far between, and typically if there is an opening somewhere it will probably go to somebody who knows somebody, unfortunately, it's just how it is. But I did a lot of cold-calling, and when I started I was also trying to get jobs in film production, because I wanted to know everything about filmmaking, and I started



cold-calling film companies, told them who I was, told them I was up for learning. Did they have anything? Even if it was just a week? And I got jobs that way.

Your first self-published novel came out in November 2016, and in the following December I saw you tweeting that you'd had a bit of success...

Yeah, it got to bestseller status, because it hit number one in some of the categories that it was in.

How did you do it?

This was naughty. Don't do this. Do your research.

***Don't write the book, put it up and just pray, which is kind of what I did.***

My boyfriend was coming over from the States and he's not here that often so I had all this stuff building up and I just had to get it all done and so I joined a bunch of Facebook groups. This has been the most amazing thing for me. There are so many Facebook groups with self-published authors, lots of them in the same boat as you and I, in that they're just starting out. Some people are in there and they haven't published anything yet, but they're building up to when they publish, which is a hundred percent what I recommend to you guys. You just learn from the people who are doing it and a lot of these writers that I'm in the groups with, they've only been going for three or four years, so not that long, but a lot of these are already on six figures, some of them are on

seven figures, and they're outselling your traditionally-published authors, and they're making a hell of a lot more money than they are.

***I'm talking money because this is a business, and that's how I treat it. I want to entertain the masses, but I have to pay my bills, too.***

Those authors, they're just awesome. If you have any questions, just shove it in there no matter how stupid, no one takes the mickey, everyone knows that we had to start somewhere. They only started a few years ago, they remember. And, typically, in each of these Facebook groups, as soon as you join, right at the top, there's *The Hundred Most Asked Things From Newbies*, so you don't even have to ask! These guys have done the work for you. You've just got to go in there and read it all.

## Any of these groups that you particularly recommend?

I'm writing YA books at the moment, so there's a great one that I'm in AAYAA, All Things Fantasy & Promos, and they're awesome. They do great things like Tuesday Team Up, every single Tuesday, if you've got a book that's just come out, or you're Tweeting something and you want more eyes on it, you put it in there and anybody that sees it and wants to help, they then Tweet it to their followers and everyone helps and supports and nurtures in that way. The other one that I love is the For Love Or Money group, by Susan Kaye Quinn, she's brilliant. She's also written a couple of 'How To' books. If I'd done it the proper way, absolutely I would have got her books first, did what she said in there, and launched my book. It would have been more successful.

***Write the book, but whilst you're writing the book I would say give yourself at least a few months to try and learn the process of launching a book, how to give your book the best***

***chance possible, because writing a great book is just the first part. Getting eyes on it is the hardest part.***

Getting your book to be what they call sticky, so it sticks in the charts and stays high ranking, that's like a whole other thing. And there's a lot of stuff you've got to constantly do to keep that ball rolling, unless you're super-lucky.

You have a personal and private Facebook page and an author page. Which one are you using to join these groups?

I'm using my author page for people to see me talk about my books and my writing, and I'm using my personal Facebook for everything else, which I probably shouldn't, but y'know, I never do things properly!

How do you break up your day?

I haven't quite got it structured yet, like my screenwriting would be, but I am trying to spend some time on Monday, maybe half the day doing promoting and marketing work, and again on Friday, and then trying to do the rest of the time writing books. It's not really working, because there are two films I'm supposed to do as well!

I started publishing my screenplays as well. I realised nobody's done it, and I don't know if this will be successful experiment. Nearly all that up are up on Amazon are very famous movies, but I thought I've got all these screenplays and they're not earning money while they're not getting

made, and then I thought about how the film industry likes a sure thing... it's always about established IP (intellectual property). If you're an established brand like Harry Potter, people are going to throw money at you to make it.

***If you're an original screenwriter, with an original project, and no existing IP, no one wants to know. No matter how good it is.***

When you think, oh, Hollywood makes all these terrible films, why is no one writing original projects... We are! They're not making them! Don't for a second think that we're not. We really are, and they're fricking good as well. But they're not getting made because Hollywood loves a sure thing and their budgets are getting astronomical, the stakes are getting higher and they're not willing to make the gamble. There's this low pocket of low budget indie movies, which we're all trying to make, or there are these giant tentpole movies, and there's not too much in-between, and there lies the difficulty. I just thought, why not try and get an established IP fanbase for all my screenplays?

## Is that also what spurred you on to do self-publishing?

## Or would you have written them anyway?

Oh, absolutely. The same way that I started, I looked for opportunities. When you don't have the contacts, or the trust funds, and you've got to think outside the box and think what else is no one doing? A lot of the ideas that I write are really big budget, they're really big ideas, end of the world, apocalypse, zombies, spirit ninjas, that sort of thing.

***The thing to do is look for opportunities, look for ways of doing it, so I decided I've got all these stories and all these ideas and lots of them are high concept, so I thought why don't I just turn them into series of books?***

Because I can connect with readers. It's very hard (as a screenwriter) to get to the stage where people actually see your work. I wanted people to enjoy my stories, get what I'm trying to say, get my themes and messages, love the characters as much as I love them, and to be entertained. Self-publishing is a way of controlling that. As a screenwriter, you write your project and it's in the hands of everybody else. You don't get a choice what happens. If somebody buys it, or a producer comes on board, or a director's come on board, you have to do what they want, and then there's nothing you can do in that process. Your baby is taken away from you, and whether it happens or not, whether it works or not, whether the final thing is what you conceived, all of that is out of your hands as the writer, which I think a lot of people don't realise.

***With self-publishing, you get to decide everything. At the same time, it's such a fast industry and you can interact with people so quickly. If something isn't working, someone can tell you and you can fix it very fast, which I love. It's so amazing, I can write the book, and then publish it, and then people are reading it a few weeks later. That never happens in screenwriting.***

## What sparked the idea to self-publish?

When you see these big Hollywood movies coming out now, it's always based on the bestselling book, isn't it? I thought, that's it, I'm going to write bestselling books! I had a meeting at Heyday, the producers behind Harry Potter, and one of the things that happened is I pitched them a project, which the head of development really loved, but she said to me that even they would find it hard to make, because it was original and expensive and it wasn't an established IP. And I just thought,

Jesus, if even the Harry Potter people are saying this what chance do we normal mortals stand of any of these things happening? Her advice to me was why don't you write this as a book and when it's a bestseller... Just like that! Like it's so easy. And that's what her advice was and it was in the back of my head for a year or two, and I got fed-up with how long things were taking.

## What were your big mistakes when going into self-publishing?

Not doing my research before I launched my book.

***I cannot stress this enough: look for Facebook groups, look for these authors that I've already mentioned, they have all this free information. They're there to help.***

See how they do things. Build up your mailing list of people who are already interested in your books, then when you launch a book, you hit them up beforehand and say hey, this is coming out. You can give away your books if you want to, they're your books, and then, hopefully, some people will read it and if they like it they will leave reviews. Reviews are crucial, because other people judge your book based on what the review are saying and how many stars it has.

***So, I'd say build up your mailing list, do your research, get a professional cover design.***

I'm having my first one re-done now, because I don't think it's catnip for the audience, so I'm relaunching that book in a few months' time, and I'll probably relaunch it at the same time that I launch the second book in the series. Big plans, people!

Get yourself a website, too. That's crucial. People need to have somewhere to go. It should say something like Join My Mailing List.

***The number one thing you want when you start up is not actually to sell books, I know you think it is, but I think the number one thing is to get fans and get a mailing list together, because those people, if they like your stuff, they will buy your stuff and then they will also recommend your stuff.***

When you started, did you have anything to offer, like a short story?

No, one of my mistakes that I made, my mailing list was basically people I knew. And a few people that I got off of a promo. I joined a thing for a month, [Instafreebie](#), and it's a website where you can put whole books up, or chapters, or anything really, and just give it away. But you can require that they sign up to your mailing list. I made the mistake of just sending out a few chapters on Instafreebie, so I did get about forty or fifty people join up, but that's nothing. Whereas, if you give away a whole book, you'll get thousands of people joining. People like freebies. This only works if you're writing book one of a series, so I wrote a short story. It's what we call a magnet, to attract new readers, and you say join my mailing list and get a free book. And also within your novella or short story you should feature the first few chapters of the book that you're actually trying to sell, which is what I've done.

## Did you use an editor?

Editors cost a lot of money. I don't want to spend, if I don't have it. I'm really running this like a proper business. So I haven't used an editor that charges, but there are websites that do this for you. One's called Grammarly, one's called Pro Writing Aid, and you can put in your whole manuscript and it will flag up immediate issues, like spelling mistakes, extra spacing, wrong grammar. It obviously won't catch everything, and it won't be as good as a pair of eyes, but it will weed out basic mistakes. What I intend to do is, when this is doing really well as a business, is I will pay someone to go back and do this all properly, and make sure they're perfect. When you first start, I wouldn't say go crazy, because it costs thousands of pounds for an editor. And who has that sitting around if you're a newbie writer? Don't fret too much, try your best, and get one of these online editors, publish it, and then later, when you start making money, then you can try and go back and get a proper editor.

## How long did it take you to write *Wanted*?

I started six years ago, and then I got super busy with all the film and TV work, and I just did not have time to go back. And then last year my boyfriend read some of it and he said, 'Oh God, this is so good, why have not done this?' and then he really was the encouragement that I needed to sit my butt down and get my first book out. Then it was just super fast. I was trying to do ten thousand words a day.



## Whoa, how many a day?

About ten thousand. I've always written fast. When it takes you longer, it's because you write one sentence and go like, oh that's not good enough, and you go back and spend half an hour tweaking that sentence to death. Not having the luxury of a lot of time, the best way for me is to blitz it. Do not worry about how it sounds on the page when you're writing it.

***Just write, just get the first draft done. The beautiful writing comes when you start editing, when you go back and rewrite.***

I would literally just write, and never went back, and that's how I did it really fast, that's how I was doing ten thousand words a day.

## What's in the future? What are your ambitions for your books?

Bestsellers, obviously! All of them. I just want to do really well. I want to get to a point where lots of readers are discovering them and loving them, and they develop their own IP, and then the studios will be like, here's all the money, let's turn them into movies! I still have the films and the TV series, that's always my main, big goal, but I've learned now it's a marathon, not a sprint. You can't control so much in the film and TV world. You can only control your writing, that's all you can control.

***I never knew it would be this fun and I never knew I would get so much from it. I'm really thriving doing this on the self-publishing side.***

# Episode 29: Kate Harrison - Insight Into Bestsellerdom

*Kate Harrison is the award-winning novelist of **The Starter Marriage**, **Brown Owl's Guide To Life**, **The Secret Shopper's Revenge** and more, but when she discovered a diet regime that changed her life, she used her insight experience with the BBC to produce a bestselling series of non-fiction 5-2 diet and lifestyle books.*

## How did the first 5-2 diet book come about?

It came about partly because of being an author, and sitting at my desk and using biscuits to reward myself. Although, I've struggled with my weight my whole life, ever since trying out hideous cottage cheese and pineapple on crisp bread regimes in my late teens, thinking I was much bigger than I actually was. Then eventually I did become bigger than I had been then and I hit my highest weight just over five years ago now, and I was feeling really stressed out about it, and I watched a Horizon programme about intermittent fasting and thought maybe that could work, and tried it out for a short while. I saw the programme, but there weren't any books explaining the latest science and how to do it, so I kind of made it up as I went along and I set-up a little Facebook group with a few friends who were also doing it, about six of us, and it really started to work for me. For the first time in years of trying every diet going I thought that maybe this could work, and maybe I could stick at this?

*And I thought I'm a writer, and it's working, and there's not a book about this, there's a gap in the market, perhaps I could write a book about it, and it all went from there.*

You were already published as a novelist. Did you approach a publisher for this?

I talked to my agent first of all and she thought it was a good idea and then we spoke to Orion and they had their doubts. They said who are you really to do this? You're not a scientist, you're not a doctor. I said, yes, but I am somebody who's been through it, I have had that experience. So they said we're not really sure about this idea, thanks, but no thanks.

I'd already worked on the idea and how I might like to do it and I know that I'm somebody who gets really enthusiastic about ideas and new things, so I thought maybe now is the time — with Kindle becoming a big thing about five years ago — to see if I can write this book anyway, put it out there, no harm done.

What were your expectations?

I didn't know for sure, all I knew is I had found things out that I wanted to share. I also wanted to write it as a proper book. I knew that people had read my fiction, and I was a journalist before that, I didn't want to rush something out that would be nonsense, so I approached it exactly the same that I would a conventionally-published book. As for my expectations, I guess I hoped people would buy it. I took some time away from the fiction to do it, so I hoped that I would make back the money from the time that I had given up to do it, and I also sensed that there were a lot of people out there who wanted to find out more about this, so I thought I could make it work. It was a bit of an

experiment. I'm curious how things work, I was curious how intermittent fasting works, and I was curious about what we could do in terms of getting involved with the publishing process, getting behind the scenes, the nuts and bolts.

## How much about the nuts and bolts did you know going in?

I knew quite a lot about pitching and reaching an audience and refining what you were offering to somebody, because I had worked in television and my most fun job that I did in television was working in programme development, which is coming up with the ideas for the wacky and weird and wonderful factual shows that were going to appear on BBC1 and BBC2. That was dream job really, apart from being an author. There was lots of sitting on bean bags and brainstorming and coming up with the wildest and wackiest ideas you could.

***From that, I had also come to think in quite a lot of detail about the audience for a book. Specifically who you were aiming at, and how you would position that book, how you would think about what the title would be, what it would look like, specifically what areas you would look at, and the tone of voice, which is really relevant for fiction and non-fiction.***

So, I think I understood about the marketing side. I've always had ideas about my covers, you won't find an author who doesn't have a strong idea about their cover when it's given to them, but I'm not much of a designer. As for the actual getting out there and selling it through Kindle, we didn't know much about it, but I did have a friend who had started writing erotic fiction. She had done some really interesting work on Amazon where she had gone in, and where you type something into Amazon it predicts what it thinks you're going to want next — could be quite a dangerous thing with erotic fiction! — but she started typing in 'Erotic fiction' and then saw what

came up. What were people actually looking for? It would tell you what people were actually searching for, and she worked out that people were looking for a student-teacher kind of thing. Not my scene! And we are talking about consenting adults here! She had worked that out and she designed a whole brand around that and it sold — not *quite* Fifty Shades-levels — but it sold incredibly well. And she was a conventionally-published fiction writer, who started making more money from her dirty books. She was doing really cool stuff, she talked me through it, she told me about an eBook that I could buy. I think it was called Making A Killing On Kindle, and it had a lot of the techniques that you could use. So, with my agent, we just embarked on this not knowing if we were going to make it work or not.

## So your agent was completely on board?

Yes, she was, and she had actually started doing some experimenting with publishing direct already, but this was our big attempt at doing a non-fiction book, which in some ways is easier to do, I think, because you are offering something quite specific to people. You are saying, here's how you can learn to lose weight, speak French, sell lots of books. You're offering something that people are likely to Google. Whereas they're unlikely to put into Amazon, 'I'm looking for a book that makes me cry by the end of chapter thirteen, and then want to go off and travel the world by the end of chapter twenty-six.'

## When did you start thinking about non-fiction?

I lost the weight in 2012. I was still losing it when I was writing the book. I guess my background in journalism (helped). I had written a lot of things. I had written the BBC's guide to development and brainstorming techniques, so it wasn't quite my first attempt, but certainly for a mass market audience it was my first go.

## Do you find that people have connected with your books because it's you telling your story?

A hundred percent. One of the things that I decided to do when I was planning the book originally was to include my own diary of trying this out. You won't find that in a lot of diet books. An awful lot of health books come from a top-down approach. A doctor or a professor saying to you 'This is what you should do.' Sometimes that's slightly patronising and it comes across as 'You little person who can't manage to lose weight, or sits on the couch all day and needs to learn to run.' I was very much speaking as somebody who is an intelligent person — I like to think — but couldn't find a way to lose weight, and wanted to talk about the pros and cons, so I wanted to talk about my bra being a bit too tight, and I showed this to my partner and said this is what I'm putting in, and he said, 'Some of that's a bit personal,' and I said don't worry, probably no one else will read it.

It didn't turn out quite like that.

## Do you find a lot of fiction writers tell you they want to write non-fiction?

I get quite a lot of people who say 'I wished I'd done that!' on the diet. We (authors) write a book to understand something. When it's fiction you might be thinking I really want to understand what goes into making a certain decision, or why somebody is the way they are, why they do extraordinary things, whether that's good things or bad things.

***I approach fiction and non-fiction the same way. It's going through that journey of understanding and change.***

If you've got a diet book, you are talking about; somebody's got a problem, they are fatter or less healthier than they want to be, they have to go through a journey, a quest, a classic hero's journey, and at the end of it you're either going to have success, which might be a comedy or an uplifting book, or you're going to have tragedy; they're worse than they were when they started out. So whether you think about that in terms of a non-fiction story, or a fiction story, they are both offering the same thing. We read and we write, I think, to go through a journey vicariously. The only difference with this is I actually did it in real life as well.

Not all of your fiction readers would have followed you into non-fiction, so how did you build your readership?  
Was it through the Facebook group?

I set-up the Facebook group as a tool for me before I even had the idea of writing a book. Five years ago nobody had really got across the idea of Facebook groups and I had just started doing it, and I realised you could create a group that would bring people together, where you would have all the functionality of Facebook, the instant chat, being able to see people's real names and so on, but it still could be quite private, so people wouldn't necessarily be seeing everything that was going on. We started that, just a few of us who were doing the fasting, and then once I'd had the idea for the book I thought this can be two things: a source of information, I can talk to other people about what they do. Do they skip breakfast? What are their favourite fast day meals? And, as the group grew, which was happening organically, I also had a great focus group of people who were doing the diet, and I also knew, from looking at what questions they were asking, what to address in the

book. Of course, once the book was then out there, I could then say if you're interested, I've written this book, it includes some of our experiences... That was a gift from a marketing point of view, because people wanted to read about people like them and to see what had been added, and I think that really helped.

I don't think there's much crossover between my fiction and non-fiction, in fact a lot of members of my groups will suddenly go, 'I hadn't realised you were *that* Kate Harrison! I have actually got your *Brown Owl's Guide To Life*.' Now, if you put my name into Amazon, the 5-2 Diet comes up first. It's not what I imagined would happened, but when I get emails from people saying this could be my story, and reading how you were feeling low and unhealthy and worried about your health and your future, it makes me think I could do what you've done.

## You started a podcast, too... That's a foolhardy endeavour!

Because I loved broadcasting when I was working in TV, I saw this — and again it's about the nitty-gritty of getting into something and thinking how can I do this and make it fun and learn to edit — my problem is that I am a real butterfly. I will land on something, and love it, and then want to move on. So, I did do my podcast, and I think there are 17 episodes, and I haven't done one for about six months. In fact, it might be a bit longer than that. The thing is, I'm saying a lot of the same things, so if you listen from the first one right through to some of the interviews, you'll still get a lot of the same information.



## Did you ever think about using a pseudonym for the non-fiction?

I couldn't really see the benefit of using a pseudonym. There are lots of challenges if you are trying to market fiction with having lots of different genres, and I have been a terrible pain to my publisher, messing around with my genres, and I've written YA as well, under the same name. It's not easy. I like trying new things. For the non-fiction, the audience isn't that different. They face the same struggles as I do. People who like cake, and like to eat out, and they're not necessarily that different from my readership for fiction, which is predominantly women from the teens to retirement and beyond, and so it didn't feel as if I was doing something so radically different. And many of them didn't make the association anyway.

## Do you think there are similarities in narrative in fiction and non-fiction books?

I know there's been a huge amount of academic work on how we learn through story, and how we've learned right from sitting in front of the camp fire and being told not to go near that vicious animal that's out there in the woods. I think it's true; storytelling makes fact much more digestible. It's something I did loads of in TV, writing a news story — there's a reason we call it a news story — it's not packaged just as fact, it's packaged with a beginning, a middle and an end. We intrinsically and naturally relate to something that starts with a difficulty or or stage at that we're at where we want to go to something new.

*I think with fiction you've got that conscious goal, versus the unconscious need, and so your character wants something, but actually what they need to change in their lives, to come to the end of that story, might be something quite different.*

I think we can all relate to that, because none of us quite know what our life story is going to be, we're living it. And when a character is doing that, and is lost, that's something we really empathise with. It's the same with non-fiction. Your conscious and unconscious needs might be quite different. You might imagine that losing weight is going to change everything in your life for the better, actually it might just be the start of the journey. It might be about confidence, it might be about addressing some of the issues you have around food, but it's still about coming through something, an experience, and being able to relate that to somebody else. As they live vicariously through it, they will either want to do something similar themselves, or they may want to do the opposite. Even a recipe. You're offering a hook, which is the title of the recipe, you might be writing a couple of lines to set the expectation, and then you've got your list of ingredients, your method, that's the challenge to overcome, and then the serving is your happy ending.

## When you sat down to write fiction, did you borrow some of those non-fiction techniques?

They definitely have things in common, and I'm using a lot of the experiences that I had in TV, for example, so that when we used to sit down and plan a programme idea we would have this acronym: **ANABC**, which would be the answer to planning and to pitching a programme idea, and I think the same could be applied to fiction and non-fiction.

**AN** stands for **Audience Need**, which you could then see as reader need as well: what is it that they want to have delivered? In the non-fiction approach, that's quite straightforward: they want to

lose weight, they want to feel healthier, but I think it relates to the reader need as well, because if you look at what somebody wants from a crime book — they want to be on the edge of their seat, they want to enter into a scary world, they perhaps want to be afraid, or challenged, they want a resolution where they're going to feel either all is good, or sometimes they want one where it says life is more complicated. So that's your need. A romance book is quite different; you're going to hopefully be ending up feeling that true love is out there in whatever form.

**ABC** is **Approach, Benefit** and **Competition**. **Approach** is your style. What is it that your idea and your writing style and view of the world is going to offer? How is that going to come out during the book?

Your **Benefit** is more about the emotional need with a fiction book. How is that person going to feel while they read the book and when they put it down. Is it going to be one that fills them with evocative sensory moments? Or is it going to be that they can't stop reading? They're flipping the pages and wishing it wasn't over, but they need to know.

And **Competition**: what is already out there? I talked about the diet books. There are a lot of books with people talking top down, there aren't that many of people experiencing things. In fiction terms, competition is about saying have there been too many books with 'Girl' in the title? Is there too much thriller out there? Well, no, because people will always love a thriller. But what can you do that hasn't got 'Girl' in the title? What can you do that hasn't got missing children in it, which is the theme that seems to have been there for the last year or so? And if your book is about missing children, how can you flip it so that people still think it's different enough that they haven't read it all before.

## And you do that at the beginning of writing a novel?

What I always do before I write a novel is to write the blurb on the back of the book. I always sit and think about the title. The title may change, the shoutline — the subtitle underneath, which is enhancing the title and saying to the reader ‘What’s the story question here?’ — and then the blurb on the back. I might not even know what the ending is myself, but I’ll know what the tone is. I know what it is that I’m offering to somebody. Am I going to thrill them? Am I going to make them cry? Am I going to make them laugh?

***I check back quite often in the process of writing, because I get quite carried away. It’s like a little touchstone. I can come back and I can say, ‘Is this book delivering what I thought it was going to deliver at the beginning?’***

If it’s going in a different direction, it doesn’t matter, actually. Because I can change the blurb far easier than I can change the story, but in terms of the emotional experience you’re offering the reader, and ultimately you’re going on yourself as a writer — you are your first reader — that’s the thing that’s as important.

***The thing that I’ve learned from being a writer as well as being a reader is that it is the story every time, and it is the emotional content of the story that matters far more than the sentences.***

There are, frankly, some books out there that are written in the ugliest sentences imaginable, but you cannot put them down. Movies, TV, factual programmes, it all has to be about the transformation, the jeopardy. What are you doing to your character? What are you therefore, by

default, doing to your reader? Messing with their head. You have to be really clear on that. And that's what the blurb does, that sums up what you're offering.

## How did you use insight at the BBC?

We used to brainstorm trends when I worked at the BBC. And you don't think of the BBC as being particularly forward-thinking, you think of it as being stuffy old Auntie, but actually the development side of things was really quite far advanced. We would talk about brainstorming, idea showers and watering holes! Have you come across a watering hole? I think it came from Stanford University, so it's very California-trendy. It's the moment in the evening where all the big beasts of the jungle come together with a common purpose in mind — to drink water — without killing each other. In BBC terms this was about bringing together the big beasts, the commissioners, but lots of different backgrounds to try and build an idea. As mad as it sounds, it was just about getting people from different disciplines together to market and build an idea. We would look at a trend, we would say baking is trend, what can we do? When I came to have my first novel published in 2003, I remember talking to editors and the blank looks I used to get, 'Oh, you couldn't possibly be thinking who the reader is!' I would ask, 'Who do you think is reading women's fiction?'

'Oh, I don't know... Women? Who like fiction?'

Well yes, but what is it *emotionally* that they are getting out of it?

***I don't believe in writing by numbers, because for a TV programme or a novel to work it still has to have a heart to it, it still has to have a drive that the programme-maker of the writer wants to explore. It can't be totally cynical.***

I like the way that publishing is moving a bit closer towards understanding what people are getting out of a book. And I'm not just talking about demographics, I think you can number-crunch till the cows come home and it won't give you a bestseller, I'm talking about who are the readers reading

this? And what a lot of publishers and TV people don't appreciate is just because I'm reading *Bridget Jones* one day, doesn't mean that I'm not going to pick up Ian Rankin or a great American novel, or a history of the Romanovs the next day.

***People read according to their moods. I don't think you should put them into boxes.***

Like, my reader is Charlotte, she's 32, she commutes every day from Peckham Rye to this, that and the other... That's wrong. I think it's about the mood of your reader in that specific moment. What are you going to deliver to them?

If you're on holiday, for example, you've got a completely different need. I've started listening a bit more to audiobooks recently. Certain books really work so well as an audiobook, and certain ones don't, and I think even that comes down to — another awful word I hated from the BBC — 'granulation'. When I first heard that, I thought what the hell does that mean? Granulated is sugar! But, really, going down to which books work as an audio experience, what your narrator needs to be like, is so interesting and I think we're going to see more and more about what emotional response people are getting. Maybe even brain science: what bits are firing up when they're listening to an audiobook versus reading a thriller versus and romance.

## How do you plan a non-fiction book?

I sit down and think about those questions: who is going to be picking this book up, and what do they want to know? And then I might get loads and loads of Post-It notes and write those subjects all over; each different subject and sub-question on a different note and then have a bit of a fiddle around. There's something quite nice about doing something physical. Actually writing something down, in handwriting, with lots of different colours, with a big board, and moving things around can feel like playing again, and that's a lovely feeling. I've just been planning to do a course looking at some of these things. I did it the same way, thinking; What is my student going to want to know?

Does this topic naturally come under that chapter? At what stage are they ready for each bit of information? How do you divide it up so it's not too stodgy? I do actually use Scrivener more for non-fiction than fiction, because I find that ability to be able to have your virtual Post-It notes and move them around is very liberating. I tend to edit in Word, in more detail, but to get a first draft down (I use Scrivener). Even when it comes to recipes — I've written three recipe books now as part of this — what sections are going to go where? Is this a brunch or is it more of a salad? Where does it go and how should I structure it? Scrivener is so good for that, because it doesn't tend to then freeze as Word often does if you're trying to do a bit too manipulation of text.

## Do you have a go-to book for how to write non-fiction?

Not especially. There isn't as much devoted to that. I will read other non-fiction books for inspiration, by which I don't mean diet books, but other books that are dealing with popular science, for example. There's quite a lot of science running through what I'm dealing with, and I might read a really good food book if I'm trying to write better recipes. So it would be much more subject- or mood-specific again, rather than thinking that I need someone to tell me how to structure that book, because it all comes back — as I am saying ad nauseam — to story again!

# Episode 30: David Shelley - The Future Of Publishing

*David Shelley is the CEO of Orion Publishing and the Little, Brown Publishing Group. He started as an editor, working with some major talents including Iain Banks, Val McDermid and JK Rowling. He spoke to us not long after it was announced that the Hachette Publishing Group had purchased the Indie eBook publishing company Bookouture, and we discussed the future of publishing.*

## What's a typical day in the life of a publishing CEO?

One of the things I love about this business is there is no typical day. One of the joy of publishing is different things are thrown at you every day, and the world changes so fast, particularly in media. The last ten years has been a blizzard of change. I'm lucky enough to have good people who run different bits of the businesses that I look after, so we have a great MD of Little, Brown, a great MD of Orion, we have a great sales director, ops director, finance director, so my role is not so much a doing role, it's lightly conducting role. That's how I like to think about it; like a conductor making sure everything's working as it should. Sometimes I do need to go in and put a fire out somewhere; there'll be a problem, or an author who's unhappy, or something that's not working as it should, or it could be one of our retailers is in trouble. I'll get drawn into particular things, but otherwise I'm looking over everything. It's hard to describe.



***Most of all I'm making sure our authors are happy, because if they're happy and being well-served, then everything's great, we've got a successful business, and I think you forget that at your peril in our business. The authors are right at the centre of everything.***

## You started as an editor before you moved up the ranks?

I was working at a very small publisher in Brixton called Allison & Busby. Just five people, and I started off as an editorial assistant, then a junior editor, then, due to a few bits of good luck, very quickly I was able to run this small publisher, which was an incredible experience and probably prepared me a lot for doing what I do now. When you do something like that you see all aspects of the business; so I was looking after the sales, and helping design the covers, and proofreading, and taking mail sacks down to the post office. Doing absolutely everything. Once you've done absolutely everything you feel nothing can really surprise or unnerve you. It was a great grounding. Then about twelve years ago I moved to Little, Brown to be a crime editor.

I'd always commissioned a range of fiction and non-fiction; crime, literary, whatever. I was approached about a job doing crime fiction, working with great authors like Mark Billingham, I found it very hard to resist, even though in some ways it was a smaller than I had been doing — running a small company — but that in its way was brilliant as well as it gave me the experience of really focused publishing. I only had a few authors every year and my job was to make them into huge bestsellers, which was a brilliant experience.

# In your experience what are the essential elements of a bestselling author (no pressure)?

If I knew the answer to that I would be on a Caribbean island somewhere... I think authors need to read a lot, and to genuinely love the area that they're writing in. I think it's very difficult to write a bestseller if you're writing in an area you don't personally have some affinity with, or writing a book you don't personally want to read. Most of the bestselling authors I've worked with have a real passion for books, whether they're science fiction, crime, or literary novels. They have a passion for storytelling. There is a rare sort of author who is a born storyteller, and actually doesn't read a lot else, but those are the rarity, those are the one or two percent. The ninety-eight percent are great readers.

***Be a great reader, you have to have passion for the area you're writing in.***

Don't try to be mechanical about it, don't try to write in an area you think is successful. You have to love those books as well for that to work. Authors who have an understanding of character drive engagement. You can have the best plot in the world, but if you don't care about the characters then no one's going to read it. People often say Agatha Christie or Ian Fleming are classic plotters, but they also have great characters. Think about Poirot or James Bond, those are fantastic characters and you can't have plot without character, but you can have character without plot. There are brilliant bestselling novels by John Updike, Richard Ford, based around a character and not much plot.

***For me, character is really essential if you want to be a bestselling author. Understanding character and an interest in psychology.***

One thing that ties a lot of the authors together that I've worked with is I genuinely feel I learn something from them when I see them. There's almost something of a teacher quality to bestselling authors, a desire to impart wisdom, knowledge. Not always as heavily as that, or as consciously, but whatever genre they're writing in I learn from them and there's something that they're doing that's transmitting something of their experience, their knowledge, which maybe sounds a bit woo-woo, but there's often a very special quality that's indefinable, but it's almost like when you meet that person you want to listen to them.

There's not a disconnect between the person and their work. There's a synchronicity, not to say that they are their character, or they are their work, but when you meet them you can understand how that person produced that book.

***They also have quite a strong moral sense. Everyone's morals are different, but a lot of the authors I've worked with have a very strong sense of right and wrong. They have an opinion about it.***

Think about Mitch (Albon), think about Val (McDermid), think about Denis Lehane, a lot of bestselling writers have that, and as readers that attracts us. When someone has a clear ideology that they're expressing through fiction, that's very compelling.

## What are some of the things we writers need to look out for in the future of publishing?

It's a really interesting landscape at the moment, things have never been as fluid. Ten years ago there was a very stark choice: people could publish with a publisher, or they could set up their own publisher at huge cost and probably not achieve much distribution, or they could publish with a vanity publisher at a huge cost and not achieve much distribution. There were no good options.

Now there is option of self-publishing very inexpensively, you can distribute your work on Amazon and other internet retailers, you can work with small eBook publishers, crowdfunding, there are so many different options for indie writers. I really like it because there is this fluidity where people will do a book like that, it might do very well, then they might sign up another book with us, we might publish it, and they might move back and forth. That's going back to my point about serving authors well. We then have to be on our A-game to make authors think, actually I love this experience of being published by Orion compared to being indie published. I think it's helped us really raise our game, because I think, to be honest, publishing probably was, twenty years ago, was a bit complacent, maybe there weren't many options, and I think in any industry where there is creative disruption that is actually a good thing for the industry because it makes people work harder, be better, be more focused on the client, the author. If I were an author now I would feel very optimistic about my options. I wouldn't feel the need to define, I'm going to go down this route, or I'm going to go down that route. I would say, I'll publish some short stories online, see how that goes, see what the reader feedback is, then I might explore getting an agent, getting a contract with a publisher, but if that doesn't work out, I might self-publish, I might go down the Bookouture route of an indie publisher... Or, if I've been published by Orion and that didn't work out, then I might go down that (indie) route. We've published lots of people who've started as indie published, and then we've also worked with people who have then gone on to become indie published. I feel very relaxed about that.

## How closely do the big publisher groups like Hachette watch the indie market?

If you're a decent publisher, then you're looking to see what readers are reading. We look at online bestseller charts very closely to see; What is it about these books that is attracting people? Why are people drawn back to these characters? What's happening? We've learned a certain amount

from that and we often will feel we'd like to work with some of those authors. You also see people who get exceptional reviews online, and they might not be the bestselling authors, but they can get these incredible reviews. We've published authors like that before, who've come to our attention because the passion from readers has been so strong.

***I'm a big believer in actual consumer data, and you can see from that where consumers are engaging with authors. It's a great testing ground for us.***

You mentioned Bookouture, and there have been headlines recently about Hachette acquiring Bookouture, what are you able to tell us about that?

Bookouture is a very innovative, vibrant, dynamic eBook-first publisher. They were started four years ago by a young entrepreneur called Oliver Rhodes, and he's worked in the publishing industry and thought, I can do eBooks better than the traditional industry does. His focus is commercial fiction, and they publish eBook first, often eBook only, they get the best cover art that looks amazing when it's a small jpeg, they do really great online marketing, they look very carefully at pricing, and at metadata as well, which is quite a boring word, but it's actually a very important one.

***Metadata is all the words that describe a book when you're searching.***

You either see them visibly, or they're invisibly leading you towards different things online. And metadata is a large portion of our existence now. It dictates what we look at online.

Metadata is things like the title, the product description, the categories, certain keywords... It's a bit of a dark art, isn't it?

It is, and often those words will be hidden, so you might be searching on an online retailer and you might just type in 'adventure story' and then stuff will come up, and it often won't say 'adventure story', but there are these invisible, embedded words to describe words, and they will say 'adventure' and they will point you in that direction. Bookouture have worked really hard on that side of things, and they've had a lot of success. They've had some massive bestselling authors in eBook, a guy called [Robert Bryndza](#), [Angela Marsons](#), [Louise Jensen](#). These people have sold millions of eBooks. We've been watching them really closely, as have lots of publishers, and we thought we'd love to work with them and learn from them, and they would compliment what we do very well.

Is this the beginning of the merging of the indie and the traditional worlds of publishing?

I think it's us saying that we can learn from Bookouture, and Bookouture saying what we do can be enhanced by what Hachette do. There are elements of what very old establishment publishers can do, and what really new dynamic four-year-old companies can do, and on both sides we're saying if we work together we'll both be stronger.

***It's not binary any more. Anything that's to do with authors, I want us to be in that space, I want us to be engaged with it, I want us to be experimenting, learning from people.***

You can't be King Canute about it. The consumers are doing what consumers are doing; people are living online a lot, and we have to go along with that and learn about that, we can't protect things or keep other things at bay, we just need to be open to everything, I think.

The Kindle chart seems to be a place for indie authors to prove themselves to the traditional publishers, would you say?

Sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally. Often authors will be very happy self-publishing, and then some of us will swoop in and make them offer. Sometimes they'll accept it, sometimes they'll refuse. We've got authors we'd love to work who consistently tell us, no, actually, I love publishing myself, I get a lot out of it in all sorts of ways, thank you very much but I'm really happy.

***The interesting thing is the rise of the indie author who loves being an indie author. There are those who just love the whole process.***

I've met indie authors who love all the metadata, who love the dynamic pricing, who actually get off on all of that and love being a mini-entrepreneur. Those people are fascinating. Going back fifteen-twenty years ago that simply was not an option. No one was going to say I'm going to vanity-publish all my books. It would be career suicide. Whereas now you can have an amazing career and choose your own route.

## Can we talk about your involvement in Hachette's diversity initiatives?

It's something I feel very passionate about and a lot of people here do, too. In the book publishing business there are several reasons for that. Many of us feel morally it's the right thing to do. We often come into book publishing because you have beliefs and values and that's one of them for a lot of people. Also, we're palpably not publishing for the widest possible audience if we're not diverse in terms of who we are here. People from a BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) background, from a low SES (socio-economic status) background, disabled people: we need to be a rich, diverse place internally here. Not just in editorial, but in our sales department, publicity, marketing, design, in order to fully-embrace the world that we live in. The danger in publishing, if you aren't diverse enough, if you are a certain sort of bookish, white, upper middle class person, that you can publish for that same sort of person. Just as an example, we went into an inner-city school, these fantastic 14-year-old girls, and we were saying to them what sort of books would you publish by what authors and they were throwing all this stuff at us that we had no idea about — never come up in any acquisitions meetings of ours — rappers, Youtube stars, whatever, and it was really clear that their lives were very different to our lives and we need to have people in this building whose lives connect in some way with people's lives outside. It's a really important thing for our industry. We're doing a lot of initiatives to try and make ourselves a more diverse place to work in, like we're working with a recruiter who really targets BAME and low SES people, to persuade them that publishing is a good industry to work in. The other thing is our industry doesn't traditionally attract people who are not of a certain class and type, because we don't market ourselves in that way, and we're working really hard with school kids, universities, entry-level jobs to attract a far more diverse workforce. We're doing a big thing with our board. All of us are mentoring someone who is identified as not currently represented on our board, which is an exciting thing to be doing.



## What are your hopes for the next five or ten years?

We would like to see the broader range of different people at all levels in the organisation. We'd love to see more women in leadership positions, love to see BAME people on our board, which we don't currently have, and just in terms of the way that we publish I would like to be surprised and challenged every time I see the books that we're publishing.

## What advice to you have for us? What shall we look out for in the next few months as we move towards publication?

One thing I see when people are working on a book is, weirdly, the further along they are with it, the harder it becomes for them to describe the book, or to say anything very cogent about it, or necessarily appealing. I think the most important thing for you is to think about your pitch for the book and how you describe it to someone very, very quickly and in a compelling way. If you can't, then maybe there's something about the book that isn't quite working.

I've seen some really bad blurbs by writers about really good books that they've written. Writers aren't often their own best marketers. Conversely, I've seen a literary agent or a publisher will take hold of it and will describe it in a completely different way that is much more appealing and they'll often put a much better title on it, as well. Writers and their titles is a whole show in itself. It must be that thing of being so close to what you're writing.

***I would also like lots of other opinions. I would use some of these websites where you can just post stuff and put three chapters up and get feedback that way, it's almost like crowdsourcing feedback.***

See what sort of response you get, see how many people click on it, and if it's a lot of people then that's promising, and if it's not then that's feedback as well.

The relationship writers have with a freelance paid editor is very much work-for-hire, that person is helping you make the work as good as it can be, they're not necessarily there to tell you if your work is saleable, or if it's popular or if it's going to be a bestseller. I wouldn't use that person for that role. I would seed it with people that you trust, writers' groups are really good sources of feedback. I would get as much honest feedback as you can. Not from an editor, though.

## What do you do when an author delivers a book and it's not up to scratch?

That's a case when a good literary agent is really valuable. You would ring up an agent and say what did you think about this? And the agent might say what did *you* think about this? (laughs) And then having two independent opinions, you're both on the same page, and then you work out between you how to have that conversation with the author in way that is compassionate, because they will have spent a year, two years, three years working on a book, and sometimes you can see how a book might be made better and sometimes you do have to say this book will have to go in your bottom drawer, for the author's own sake more than anyone. As a publisher, if it's an author who sells well, you could sell that book. The punters haven't read it yet, so they might buy it on the strength of the title and the author's work that they've read, but it would do the author no favours if they don't like the book. If you're a good editor, a good agent, you're looking out for the author more than anything, but it's a hard conversation to have.

## How important is a thick skin, and do you see failure as part of the route to success?

I do, and I don't think this gets talked about enough; there are so many writers who will say, Oh well, of course there were the four books I wrote before I got published. Everyone knows the story about the writer who got rejected and rejected and then eventually got published, *Watership Down* or JK Rowling, but there are so many writers who say, actually my first four novels were rubbish, but my fifth one was quite good and it got published. Or you'll get someone like Ian Rankin who will quite happily say I got better as I went on. I think that's really important, and I'm always amazed that people persevered after getting three or four books turned down. There are some writers in there who are international bestselling name and you think that's part of why you are an international bestseller, because with every one of those first four books you're getting better and better, and then by the fifth you've really nailed it.

# Episode 31: Julie Cohen - Fear

## And The Praise Sandwich

*Julie Cohen is the author of over twenty novels, including the Richard & Judy bestseller Dear Thing. Her books have been translated into fifteen languages and sold nearly a million copies worldwide. She has also taught creative writing workshops for The Guardian, Literature Wales, The Writers' Workshop and Cornerstones. Liz Fenwick first told us we should get Julie on the show and we were delighted to speak to her in the run-up to the publication of her new book Together.*

You've said that you discovered writing was a process of getting a good idea and then failing to execute it.

Can you elaborate on that?

I think that writing is totally a process of failure. You do get a good idea and then you fail to execute it and then you fail to even *fail* to execute it, it's just always about failing and getting it wrong. When I first started writing I had actually already succeeded at a lot of stuff; I had gone to the university I wanted to, I did my degrees, I got the first job I applied for, everything was going really well and then I decided to write... and then I failed. I got rejected, everything that I wrote was really bad. I feel very fortunate that I was rejected many times when I started out because I know now that I have to fail before I get it right.

I make the same mistakes over and over again. Every time. I have this mistake that I have been struggling with since I first started to write, which is I need to write somebody walking into a room, and then walking across the room, and then choosing the chair they're going to sit in, and then sitting in that chair, and then how they sit in that chair, and then *how* they pour a glass of water. I forget to leave the stuff you don't need out. I've been writing professionally for twelve years now. *Still* forget that.

## Is that like a warming-up exercise?

I guess it is. You're trying to inhabit the world of these characters and just get into them, and then you forget about yourself as a storyteller and somebody who's creating something quite highly structured and mannered to make it into fiction instead of real life.

## *Together* is your twenty-first book. You've been around the block a few times.

I have, and I've switched genres a few times, I've just moved to a new publisher. There's a lot of pressure trying to do something new. You talk about failing, you get used to a certain level of failure, then the stakes are raised and then you can fail even worse and the fear gets even greater.

## What scared you the most about this new book?

It is the most technically challenging book I've ever written, because it's told backwards and it starts when the hero and heroine are in their seventies and eighties in 2016, and then it goes backwards through time in stages until 1962 when they meet in their twenties. Structuring the novel was very difficult and very challenging and I had to plan it more than anything I had ever planned anything else before. Every novel's a new learning curve, and for this one it was very much about how to structure a novel absolutely impeccably, because I couldn't hint at what was happening later, I couldn't give secrets away, I had to make everything plausible, going backwards as well as forwards. Each section — it has sections going from 2016, to the nineties, to the seventies, to the sixties — had to have its own narrative arc and drive and conflict which was different for the others. It was an incredibly challenging novel to write.

## What came first: the structural challenge, or an idea where you thought this is the only way I can tell the story?

This novel has a twist at the end, which is actually at the beginning. It's so difficult even to talk about this book. It has a secret that happens in 1962 that, if it were at the beginning of the novel it would affect the reader's perceptions in such a way they would read the book very differently. I wanted the reader to get to know these characters before they understood the characters' past and to uncover it bit-by-bit. I actually got the idea about the twist several years ago, and talked about it

with my editor, Harriet, and she said I don't think you can write that yet. Why don't you park it for a while and we'll come back to it? I remember where I was when suddenly I realised *Oh my God, I can write this book, but only if write it backwards!* It happens so rarely. I've written a lot of books, but it's very rare that you get a blinding explosion of insight. You can't predict it and when it happens it's incredible, but it doesn't happen very often and it happened with that, so I knew I had to write it backwards. And then I thought how the heck do you do that?

## When your editor said you weren't ready to write this book, why do think that was?

I just didn't have the idea in place yet. The way I presented it to her was not right yet, and I'd already worked with her for two books by then, so I really trusted her instincts, I think they're spot-on, amazing, and we also think about story in a very similar way.

***You meet people who think about story in the same way as you, who you can almost use shorthand with because you know what they expect at a certain point in a story.***

There are instinctive writers and analytical writers and I'm an analytical writer, as you might have noticed, and she understands that analytical thing, and so when she says something like that to me I really listen to her.

## How did you get into teaching writing workshops?

I was a secondary school teacher for ten years, until I left to become a full-time novelist. I really enjoy giving workshops to writers. I run my own courses, I run a consultancy, I've taught for the Guardian and for Penguin Random House.

## You often use Pixar examples in your courses. Why is that?

The Pixar thing is great. When you can show people what a subplot looks like by looking at the two plots in *Finding Nemo* and deciding which one's the plot, which one's the subplot, how do they go together, looking at the parallels, it's such a good example because Pixar films are stripped down to their basics.

***What they also do so well is that within their story world they make the story as big as it can be. Even though these are stories about fish or toys, they are actually huge stories about human nature and seeing how they do that is incredible.***

One of the things I use is the first four minutes of *Wall-E* to show you can have an act one of a story without using any telling at all. It's one hundred percent showing, and there are no words either, and how you can bring a viewer or a reader into a story just instantly by doing that.



I've got a thing about prologues, I'm not keen on prologues. I think most of the time they should go. They're written for the author rather than the reader, so I always show the first six minutes of Pixar's *Up*.

## That always destroys me...

Which is why I believe it won an Oscar. The rest of the film is good, but not as good as the first six minutes, and I was watching that the other day, and I was going... *That's my book!* My book starts when the hero is eighty and then goes back and you see their whole life together.

## When is the right time for an author to go on one of your courses?

I generally try to vet people and try to get people who have finished or nearly finished their first manuscript. I like to look at a novel in a whole structural way, which I think is difficult when you're in the middle of writing a first draft. Some authors can do that, but I think most authors need to write something really messy and have a bunch of clay before they can figure out how to mould it. So those are the authors I tend to work with the most.

***They come to me and say I've written this draft, I don't know what to do with it, and I say I'm sorry, but you need to trash sixty percent of it and then we'll start again. Sometimes that's great and works incredibly well. I can name a couple of bestselling authors who I have said that to and they've done that and they have then gone on to the top ten bestseller list.***

The hard advice is really good to get and it's the things you can't see yourself. When you're in the middle of clay you don't see how it can ever make a shape. But somebody just walking in can say there's the head, there's the tail and whatever. I think authors who just walk into the course and think maybe they want to write a novel don't have enough to work with yet. I also tend to work with authors who have maybe self-published a few books, and they want to make the leap into mainstream publishing. It's all about pushing people to the next level.

## What should a writer look for in an editor?

I've never hired an editor, I've just had editors from my publishing. I'll tell you what my good editor looks like: we understand story structure in a very similar way, and so when I tell her things she looks at it analytically. We share a similar approach. I also think she's strategic. She doesn't concentrate too much on the individual words on the page, she's much more interested in looking at the structure and the characterisation. I think if I were looking for an editor I would look for somebody who had edited a book that I had loved and really admired. Look for somebody who had that same approach.

***I always like an editor who challenges me. I really don't want to work with somebody who says this is great. I want somebody who says this is great, but... The praise sandwich is really important.***

## The Praise Sandwich. What's that?

This is really good — but I think you need to work on this — but this is really great!

It's much easier to deal with than somebody just coming in and saying oh, darling, this is a mess.

## Do you relish getting notes, still?

It depends on the book, because every book is different, it depends on the editor and it depends on the situation. With the edits on this book everything to me was like, *Yes!* Every single thing that my editor said I thought was fantastic and she really understood the book forwards and backwards and it was really amazing. Just simple things like, I want you to take the two pages at the beginning of your novel and put them at the end instead. These very simple things that make a huge amount of difference.

***I have had edits where I felt very angry, and the key is not to say anything to anybody. You have to keep that grief and anger and denial and all that stuff to yourself, and, God, not on social media, right?***

Your significant life partner is fine, you can swear to them if you're used to it, or your dog or whatever, but you cannot show any of that to your editor and you can't show any of it to anybody else because there's a process of dealing with it, and your first response will not be your last response. A good edit is a treat. It's like nothing else. It's almost like meeting somebody you have a good conversation with.

## When you get your notes, what do you tackle first: the big notes or the little ones?

Big stuff first. I always deal with the big stuff, because it's always going to affect the little stuff. My editing tool is Post-It notes.

***What I like to do is, instead of actually tackling the manuscript itself, I tackle the scenes or the ideas of the manuscript in Post-It notes.***

I like to have little pieces of paper that I can move around. It's really difficult to tackle a hundred thousand words, but it's very easy to tackle little pieces of paper. If somebody said they had a structural problem with my book, for example, I would lay out the entire structure of the book in Post-Its, story event by story event, and then move them around and shuffle them on Post-Its instead. That's the big overall stage that I would do first. I would do that way before I even tackle the manuscript.

**That's a very screenwriter-y, Pixar, thing to do.**

Yeah, I colour code it according to scenes, a character's point of view, or, in this novel that I wrote backwards it was all colour-coded to do with time periods. I'm a great believer in them.

**What was the most difficult point of the edit on your new book? Was there a scene that you kept coming back to again and again?**

No, because I planned this book out so much in detail I didn't really have that. Ironically, the hardest book to plan was the easiest book to write because I had planned it out in so much detail beforehand. I just sat down and wrote it after that. But with other books there have been problem scenes that I have to keep on coming back to and I think you have to trust your instincts with that

and if you think that a scene is not working, that's because it's not... And if you don't know why it's not working, and you keep on trying to fix it, and it's still not working, that's because it's not.

***A lot of writers think that they can get away with stuff, but the hallmark of a good editor is that they don't let you get away with stuff.***

I do a fiction consultancy and I get manuscripts that are really good and I'll write a report and I'll say I wasn't really sure about the first three chapters because they seemed to set in a different place to the rest of the book, or I wasn't really sure about what was happening in the middle here, because it didn't quite ring true to the character. And I would say about eighty percent of the time, maybe more, the author comes back to me and says yeah, I thought maybe I would push it through and maybe get away with it.

## Any other common mistakes from authors who come to you?

I think a lot of authors begin in the wrong place. They either begin way before the story starts, or they begin after the story has started already, or they think they need something exciting in there and something exciting happens, but it has no relevance to the rest of the plot. Beginnings are really hard, and I tend to deal with beginnings a lot in my course, because that's what people will bring to me. I would say that's very common... especially authors who write prologues! Not that I'm prejudiced. I've written a prologue or two in my time, but prologues just tend to delay the story. That's the most common advice I give: cut those ten thousand words.

# What does a prologue do? Why might we need one?

A prologue is how they get into the story. It's writing themselves in, and I think you do need to write yourself into the story.

***It takes ten thousand words before you know what the heck you're doing, but then you have to not forget when you finish the whole book that you've taken those ten thousand words to write yourself in, and therefore those ten thousand words might not be the right ones because you've got to the ending and everything has changed.***

In the beginning of a book there tends to be a lot of telling instead of showing, a lot of figuring out on the page what these characters are and what their back story was and giving it to the reader in big lumps. That's what prologues tend to be, quite often. A good prologue can be great, but I think a prologue should generally be written last, or at least edited last after you've finished the whole thing. My author friends completely argue over this with me, because readers like them a lot.

## Is that early exposition a common rookie mistake?

It's not a rookie mistake, it's a first draft mistake. I do it. I've just written twelve thousand words of my next book and a lot of that is just figuring out the character on the page. I was writing yesterday and my character wanted to tell me something that happened to her when she was seven years old, and I'm sure it was probably wasn't relevant, but she wanted to tell me that. I've written it down, it's on the page, it'll get cut, or maybe it'll get moved. Or maybe the reader doesn't need to know that. I just needed to know that. A book is like an iceberg. The reader sees the tip, but what the author knows is huge. And that's another thing with newer authors; I'll ask them questions and they'll say I don't know. You need to know why this happened. You can't just write it in there

because it seemed like a good thing to happen at the time. There's a lot of stuff going on underneath the surface that the reader doesn't need to see, but that you as an author need to know.

## Do you discover that while writing, or do you do a character outline beforehand?

Both. Again, it depends on the book. I have this flaky new age personality-type book called The Wisdom Of The Enneagram and it gives you a little quiz at the beginning, and you take it as your character and then they tell you which one of their nine personality types, and sub-types, and they tell you what type this person is. And it's really useful, because it tells you the type of background this character tends to have, how they are when they are unhealthy, the conflicts they tend to have in their life. And it's a great tool for fiction writers. I did that with this book that I'm writing now, because I have two heroines and I want to know how they are different, so I took the quiz and went through and did all that and that informs everything that they do.

***But then sometimes they do stuff that doesn't fit that, so there's a certain point where you have to chuck all of that and then just go with what they tell you.***

## Do you find that characters surprise you?

They have to surprise you, I think. That's one of the joys of being a writer, when they suddenly do something that you're not expecting at all and yet you realise you've been subconsciously building for the entire time. I wrote this book once where I had to have a big climactic event at the ending, and I had no idea what it was, and I made a list of everything I could think of, from aliens landing to

a cat coming in, somebody saying that they're somebody's long lost mother, or whatever. So I made a big long list of maybe twenty things that could happen. And usually when you do that, about number twelve is when the real solution comes in, and I thought, it has to be this, and I picked that out and then I thought Oh my God, I've been setting that up all the way through and I didn't even know. I literally had the object that would make that happen come into the story in chapter three.

## With an outline you might have an ending, but you should be prepared to change that ending?

If you have to. Not with this book, *Together*, but the book before that, *Falling*, the ending was supposed to be completely different than how it turned out.

## Do you get blocked and if you do how do you cope with that?

That's a really hard question, because I used to believe that writers' block didn't exist.

***I always thought that it was really caused by The Fear, which is part of what every writer has to deal with and you just had to learn to deal with The Fear and move on.***

And sometimes it's caused by not having the right idea yet. So you have a problem, but you can't work out how to solve it. Once you've solved the problem you can move on. This year I had a type of writers' block, which was caused by nothing to do with my own stories, and everything to do with



the publishing industry, and so it was really out of my control. I found it very difficult to write anything. I was writing like crazy — I think this past year I've easily written a hundred and fifty thousand words — but nothing publishable whatsoever. I've just been writing for fun, because I needed to keep my hand in, because I knew that if I stopped writing that would be the end. It's easier if you sit down every day to get something down even if it's rubbish, but it's really hard once you get out of the habit of doing it to get back into the habit of doing that. It's The Fear, in different aspects, and you need to learn how to overcome that somehow.

## Is it a question of failing less and less?

I don't know if you fail less and less. I think you fail all the time. It's an exercise in failure, and sometimes the failure that's your own is sometimes a bit easier to deal with.

***I get to the suckage point in all of my books, where I think that I am writing just the worst steaming pile of crap that anybody has ever got to.***

It's about fifty thousand words in. And that is a horrible, horrible feeling, but I've been through that enough now that I know that you actually do get over that eventually. It's hard to remember that, but I do. The fear that's harder to overcome is the fear that's nothing to do with you. The fear that has to do with readers, reviewers, and publishers, all those two-star reviews on Amazon, or the fact that WH Smiths isn't going to take your book, or that you've written the best book of your entire career and nobody's going to read it. The sort of fear that gets you at two or three in the morning. And that's a harder fear to deal with than your own failure.

***You have to ignore it. And the fear about your own failure you can overcome by working harder and not failing and finding the right solution and going for it.***

But the fear of failing because of something out of your control is, I think, more crippling. Because you can do nothing about that. All you can do is ignore it and move on.

Those un-publishable hundred and fifty thousand words... what are you going to do with those?

I'm writing a new book now, sitting down every day and writing it properly, and I thought it was a new idea that I'd had, but when I looked at it and started describing it to my friend she said that's the idea you had two years ago when you wrote three aborted beginnings. But it's shifted and changed and mutated and it's the same emotional idea, but a different plot.

***I think that no writing is ever wasted. It's stuff that'll never get published, but you'll learn something from it, either about ideas, or technique, or it will give you a feeling that you will then take on to do something else. I think every piece of writing is worthwhile.***

Is that how you start out, by wanting the reader to feel an emotion?

Often, yes. I come up with a theme for every book. I'm very analytical. I come up with the idea, but then I also think of maybe a one word theme. The theme of *Together* is love. But, it's not quite love. I can't tell you the theme because it's got a twist ending, but the theme in my book before, *Falling*, was falling, and that theme, or that emotion, informs everything that happens in the novel. I put it up on a Post-It, where I can see it every day, and that leads me to choose subplots, locations, story events, characters and even characters' names.

# Episode 32: Legal Eagles - Keith Mathieson and Paul Joseph

*We got lawyered-up in this fascinating episode where we spoke to a pair of top entertainment lawyers: Keith Mathieson is an expert in defamation and privacy law, and Paul Joseph specialises in intellectual property cases, and we quizzed them on the pitfalls authors should look out for when writing. This all came about after Messrs Stay and Desvaux wondered about including song lyrics in their book...*

## Can you include song lyrics in a piece of fiction?

Paul: Copyright law says that someone creates something of their own artistic endeavour, and that would include writing a song lyric, or a poem, or whatever. They own that, and it's an infringement of their copyright to copy that literary work, or a substantial part of it, which is judged either quantitatively, ie: you copy a lot, or qualitatively; you take the important pieces.

***Essentially someone who writes a song has copyright in it. If you were to copy a section of that out then that's an infringement.***

You might have seen a lot of use of it in the eighties, but what's hard to tell from the outside is what sort of consent they had from the songwriters. If you have consent because you agreed to pay them money, or credit them, or they just like having their lyrics in a book, then (there's) nothing to stop you there. How large would your use need to be, to be an infringement? Certainly the law over the last ten years has been clarified, generally based on European Court of Justice decisions, that

even nine, ten, eleven words, maybe shorter if it's an artistic work, can constitute protectable copyright work, and therefore it can be an infringement to copy that.

Product placement: Our novel features real brands -  
such as the wonderful Mark's and Spencer's  
Caterpillar Cake - what are the rule on featuring real  
brands in novels?

Paul: You're coming at product placement from the other side of the equation. Normally, in a movie where you have product placement — James Bond drives a BMW or whatever — that's because the brand has paid to have their brand in the movie. This is the other way round: you're saying you're writing about an everyday life situation, someone's eating a Caterpillar Cake, are you allowed to refer to it? You are.

***There's nothing wrong with referring to a product. It's very unlikely you would ever have a product name that's long enough to have copyright in it.***

If you were writing a book with pictures in, as soon as you start illustrating your Caterpillar Cake, that could be a copyright infringement of the look and feel of that product. If you were to use a brand in a way that it appeared you were trying to free ride off the goodwill in their brand, then you start coming into trademark infringement territory. So, if you were to write a book about Adidas trainers and if it looks like the book has been sponsored by Adidas then you start running into problems.

Referring to brands in an incidental way is just part of the world you're creating. That's fine.

If someone was to choke to death on a Mark's and Spencer's Caterpillar cake, would we be in trouble then?

Keith: It's unlikely. Theoretically, if people understood that bit of the novel to be suggesting that if you were to go out and buy a Caterpillar Cake from Mark's and Spencer's you might end up choking on it, then there could be a potential defamation claim. But that would be a pretty far-fetched interpretation of one episode in a work of fiction. The reality is if you choose to use the Caterpillar Cake as an instrument of death for that particular character you'd probably get away with it legally.

Context is important, then?

Keith: Context is very much the watchword when it comes to defamation. If I just talk more generally about defamation in fiction: whereas lawyers like to wind people up by making them think that terrible things are going to happen, I can give a fair degree of comfort to people who write works of fiction.

***Generally speaking, it's pretty hard to libel people in works of fiction.***

It's much more common in non-fiction, although even then book publishing is a much less risky field of publishing than, for example, newspaper publishing where I spend most of my time defending tabloid and other newspapers against libel and privacy and similar claims. Book

publishers don't get sued anything like as often as other publishers, for example, social media, newspapers, broadcasters and so on. The reason for that is, while you have deadlines, the deadlines are generally more relaxed than they are in newspaper publishing, so you have more time to check things. Because you know that it's a non-ephemeral form of publishing, people take much more care with books to make sure that they get things right. A lot of the libel problems that arise with other forms of publishing arise because people don't have time, or they don't make time, and they get careless.

Going back to works of fiction, if you are going to be held liable for defamation, you're almost certainly going to be doing something deliberately.

***If you choose to use your work of fiction as a means of getting back at your enemies, if you decide to name your principal character after your least favourite headmaster, for example, then you're asking for trouble.***

You're not going to be able to say 'It's a work of fiction, so that's my defence.' If, in the context of which people read it, people would understand that you had called that character because it was your headmaster and that headmaster is identifiable, if he's a living person — if he's dead, you'll be okay, because the dead cannot be sued for libel — and people could understand that reference and that character in your novel to be a reference to him, because they might well be able to draw a connection between the two of you, then you could be in trouble.

***If you're going to choose real people to model your characters on, make sure they're dead.***

If they're still living then potentially you have a problem. Having said that, even then it would only be defamatory if the context permitted people to think I'm moving out of the realm of fiction, now he's telling me something about a real, living person. The instances in which this has happened in practice are pretty rare. There was a case involving Jilly Cooper, which prompted a libel action. I

think it was settled fairly cheaply but it caused a bit of inconvenience for all concerned. She happened to choose a name — entirely accidentally, this was not any kind of deliberate act on her part, or on the publisher's part — for a character in her book who was the director of a TV company, and he had done various disreputable things in the novel. I think he'd had an affair. The name she had chosen was very similar to the name of a real life director of a real life TV station, and worse than that the name that she had again quite coincidentally chosen for the TV company in her novel was very similar to the TV company of which this guy happened to be a director. If you're unlucky enough for that to happen to you, you can be libelled because defamation can be committed accidentally.

***You don't have to do it deliberately, you don't have to know that you're libelling somebody.***

If a reader would simply identify a character in a novel as referring to a living person, then you could potentially be liable for defamation. How do you avoid that? Accidents will happen, it may be impossible to avoid it in every case, but if you're choosing fairly routine names you should be fine. If you're talking about George Smith, well there are so many George Smiths nobody's going to think you're actually referring to another George Smith, but if you choose a more unusual name then potentially you could be liable, so it's best to check through the internet whether there are people who happen to bear that name, if they're clearly nothing to do with your character, if they don't have any kind of shared characteristics, you should be fine. If they do, as in the Jilly Cooper incidence, then you could potentially be in difficulty.

You said the dead can't sue for libel, what if, for example, I wanted to write about Churchill and paint him in a less than flattering light? Can his estate object to that?

Keith: No, there's nothing the estate can do from a defamation point of view. In fact, I can't think of any legal remedy that they might have in that case. With historical fiction, or introducing historical characters, or even the names of historical characters into your fiction, you should be on safe ground.

If you're writing about a real person, would you need to obtain their life rights?

Keith: Just to clarify: this is a work of fiction involving someone who's real?

Yes. For example; Keith Richards from the Rolling Stones...

Keith: There really isn't concept of 'life rights'. You would be taking a number of risks if you chose to write about the real Keith Richards in a fictional way, because people are bound to think he (the author) is describing aspects of Keith Richard's life and character. They're going to think that you're talking about Keith Richards. The fact that it's a work of fiction is not really going to help you. If it's



very favourable to Keith Richards, if you're saying lots of nice things about him, you don't need to worry because the essence of a defamatory statement is it's something that damages a person's reputation, and it has to do so in a way that causes that person serious harm. If you were to say that Keith Richards doesn't always wears his seatbelt, then that's not going to be actionable in defamation. You could probably take the example of Keith Richards and go quite a long way because he's a fairly rackety character, so the drink, drugs, womanising, all that kind of stuff would probably be fair game for that particular example. But other things, such as if you were to suggest, for example, that Keith Richards had engaged in domestic violence I think you would be taking a great risk. Why are you calling this character Keith Richards, why are you putting him in a band called The Rolling Stones if you're not intending to say something about him? You certainly would be taking a risk with that kind of scenario.

**We've named some of our characters after some of our guests on the podcast. Is that a bad thing to do?**

Keith: Paul Joseph is a sufficiently common name, you be okay with him. But my name, Keith Mathieson, you might be in slightly more dodgy territory. It depends on what you say: if you say defamatory things, nasty, serious things about somebody, then yes it could potentially get you in trouble, because some people who read it might know me — it's just possible — they might think he's being described as a libel lawyer and he's called Mathieson, hang on that must be referring to Keith Mathieson. There is potentially a risk there.

We're also using real places in our book, including Glastonbury and the festival. Would that cause any issues?

Keith: From a libel point of view, no. It should be absolutely fine. The thing with libel, just to recap, is that it depends on the context. You would have to have a reasonable reader reading the novel and going out of the fiction box and thinking, 'Okay he's moved from just telling me a story to telling me about a person I can identify and he's doing so in a defamatory way.' If there are people who are particularly associated with Glastonbury, the organisers, for example, if you were to just slightly disguise their names then you could be into that territory, but otherwise, taking sensible precautions you wouldn't be.

Paul: There is a pragmatic side to all these questions of risk. You can apply the test: if I do what I'm going to do am I going to upset someone a lot? And, if I'm going to upset someone a lot who has access to funds and a lawyer, are they going to send you an aggressive letter? And, if the moment they send you an aggressive letter you're going to back down straight away, and change your text, or pulp your book, or burn it on a bonfire, then you start wondering what was the point of doing it in the first place? Because you knew they were going to write you an aggressive letter afterwards, and you knew you weren't going to fight against it, in which case it's probably not worth the risk.

Keith: There are other practical steps that you can take to avoid a potential liability if you're worried that some of your characters might be identified as real people and you might be facing some libel action, and the most obvious way of protecting yourself is to take out some insurance.

***You can get insurance for novels and London is a good place to get it.***

You can just Google libel insurance and you'll find somebody there who will probably be able to offer you a quote. If it's a novel, you're likely to get comparatively cheap insurance if it's something that you want to protect yourself against the unlikely event of this happening. You may be covered by your publisher's insurance, sometimes there are excesses or deductibles to pay, but most publishers would carry insurance which might in some cases cover the author. It doesn't always. In fact, sometimes smaller publishers will insist on getting an indemnity from the author to cover them against any action against the publisher over defamatory content or other legal issues that might arise. There are ways, if you think that you might have strayed unintentionally into legal deep water, of protecting yourselves.

How do you know when you've crossed the line from satire and parody into potential defamation? For example, how can a parody like Bored Of The Rings exist?

Paul: There are at least three different rights or areas to be concerned about. One's defamation, one is trademark infringement, and then there's copyright. If you take a play and create a satirical version of it, then you've created an adaptation of that play, which is itself potentially a copyright infringement. Making a satire is one example of an adaptation, which is a type of copy, so making a translation, a satirised version, or a shortened version. These are all copies. You've got your three different areas there.

Trademarks: You know you see those children's books like the Famous Five parodies? There is certainly going to be trademark, or goodwill, in the Famous Five and Enid Blyton's works and so if you want to produce one of those I assume they have a licence to do it. You can have a satirical style of a book, which talks about children going off and having an away day, but if you want to use a famous brand in order to sell the book, and if you think about it the reason people will pick that off the shelf and buy it is because it evokes a memory of reading those books as a child, that's the force that takes them to buy the book. That's all protected by trademarks and passing off rights. If you did that without consent of the rights holder you would run into trouble, I think.

On the copyright side, the concept of being entitled to infringe a work by having a defence of parody or satire, that's actually a new concept in English copyright law, which was only introduced within the last few years, picking up on a defence to infringement that was included at European level that hadn't actually been introduced to our law. If you read the government consultations about it, it looks like one of the driving forces behind it was to allow the sort of satirical Youtube videos of songs that you find on Youtube. Even though it's questionable that the kind of defence introduced actually helps in those situations. There's been case law now at the European courts on what parody and caricature and pastiche is. There was actually a case that went to court where there was a Belgian comic — I think the second-most famous Belgian comic after Tintin — called Suske and Wiske and essentially someone who was promoting a far-right party in Belgium took the front cover of one of those comic books and did what they said was a satire about it, but they were making a political point that supported their party view, and the court of justice held that sort of satire did fall within the parody exception were it not for the fact that it essentially demeaned the author of the original. They introduced in the back door an extra element, which isn't found in the legislation, which says yes you can do a satire, but the court is also allowed to think about what this does to the rights and reputation of the author of the original. Similarly now, in English law, if you were to produce a satire of someone's work, you might be able to escape copyright infringement, but you might still run into trouble with things like defamation, potentially, or with the

moral rights of an author, which are the rights not to have their work subject to derogatory treatment. If you produce a satire that the author of the original just hates, it's hard to see how they wouldn't argue that it's derogatory of their work.

## Shows like Saturday Night Live regularly mock public figures. How can you do that without getting sued?

Paul: The area you're in there is making mocking comments about public figures, rather than taking a copyright work, a creative work, and changing it.

Keith: If you take a TV programme, for example W1A, the satire about the BBC, that's a satire about the way an organisation works and it may well be reasonably understood to refer to certain identifiable individuals within the BBC. I don't know about the way the BBC operates to know if that's the case, but as long as your satire is reasonable, it'll be fine. Obviously people will associate a satire of the BBC with the BBC. If it's a satire of the UK Independence Party, for example, then it's going to be obvious who you're referring to. The reason you're able to get away with it is because we have a defence to defamation known as honest opinion. It used to be called fair comment. And that entitles you to comment in an uncomplimentary way on the behaviour of other people and the characters of other people. The difficulty would arise where you go over the top. For example, I remember that Spitting Image used to depict John Major, the former Prime Minister, leading a very grey and dull life, eating peas. And he used to sit there with a big bowl of green peas in front of him, from which one inferred that he was a very dull and boring person. The reality of course is that John Major didn't, one assumes, eat a big bowl of peas every night, so it wasn't literally true. The message being conveyed, that he was being a very boring guy, who had a strange passion for green food, or whatever, is simply comment, it's just opinion, it doesn't really convey anything damaging about him and it's well within the bounds of fair comment, or what

would now be called honest opinion. If you were to show John Major, or somebody in UKIP, or somebody in the BBC, engaged in some actual act of fornication at work, for example, or doing something criminal, smoking drugs, then you would have stepped right out of the honest opinion protection. You would be making a serious charge, that somebody behaved in a disreputable way. And if you do that you're going to have to defend it as true. It's gone beyond the bounds of reasonable satire into something entirely different.

The onus would be on you, the writer, to prove that something like that actually happened?

Keith: Exactly, if you make a factual allegation about somebody, as opposed to just poke fun at them, satirise them, give people your opinion about what you think of them, then you're going to have to show them it's true.

Going back to Youtube parodies, we see these disclaimers on videos using copyrighted material: I do not own this material, or this is for educational purposes only. Are they valid?

Paul: No. The internet is a bit of a wild west, and the reality is a lot of publishers and rights holders will not go after everyone who does a satire, or a mocked-up version. It doesn't really bother them. It shows that they're producing a work that's famous and is popular and it probably just lends

weight to that. The moment someone does something that the publishers don't like they will go after them. The comment I made about the parody exception not helping the Youtube videos the government said they were introducing it for; they were thinking of people taking lyrics and parody versions. But generally they're set to the exact same musical score that accompanied the original work, and that's actually a separate copyright work. You have the copyright on the musical score, the copyright on the lyrics. It's not really clear to me that parody works across all those different levels of copyright.

## Can we talk about titles? What's to stop me calling my book The Lord Of The Rings?

Paul: It's probably trademark rights to stop you doing that. Goodwill in the brand, rather than copyright. So probably not long enough in itself to be a copyright work, but certainly the reason you would be calling your book that is because you wanted people to draw that link with a famous brand so that you would sell more copies.

## Are there any past cases that we should know of that might help us?

Keith: As far as defamation is concerned, the good news for people who are thinking of publishing books is that book publishing, generally, is at the lower end of the risk scale, just because of the way books are produced. There is less scope for libel because people have a bit more time to check things and take care that they're publishing what they should be publishing. Books are quite carefully lawyered, not necessarily novels, because people don't expect fiction to give rise to libel

claims, but certainly non-fiction books of certain kinds would be looked over by a lawyer before publication. A lot of steps are taken to reduce the risk of a claim of libel arising in respect of a book. I can't actually think of any libel cases involving a work of fiction that really did any greater harm than cause a bit of inconvenience and cost a little bit of money to the publishers concerned. It's quite unusual for that to arise. With non-fiction there certainly have been quite a lot of cases against book publishers, nothing like as many as there have been against newspaper publishers and broadcasters, but there have been some. The publishers' record of cases going to trial is pretty good. One famous case, there's a film out at the moment, *Denial*, was over the attempt by David Irving to sue Penguin books and Deborah Lipstadt for libel for calling him a holocaust denier in a serious academic work, which went to trial in London and Irving famously lost. There was another case against Orion a number of years ago which concerned a book called Bent Coppers, which named a number of bent coppers, one of them sued for libel, it went to trial. The claimant copper won that in the High Court, but it was later overturned on appeal. Ultimately, the publisher won that case.

Mr. Stay: I was working at Orion at the time. I

remember having to get all the copies back from stores.

I think one reason book publishers take a lot of extra care to make sure that they get it right is that the consequences of getting it wrong can be pretty catastrophic. It's very difficult to withdraw copies in that way. If you publishing something defamatory in the Mail or the Sun or a weekly magazine, well it's kind of come and gone. Nowadays it will usually be online as well, but it's very quick to take stuff offline. The remedy is much easier in the case of those publications than it is with a book.



Bestselling authors often find themselves sued for ‘stealing ideas’, but these are rarely successful. When might someone have a case for plagiarism?

Paul: In the UK courts the most famous case like that where someone sued because they claimed their idea or plot was taken was in The Da Vinci Code case where the authors of The Holy Blood And The Holy Grail said that their themes had been copied into The Da Vinci Code. Normally, copyright is literal copying: you have text, and someone copies that text entirely or substantially, but in this case that hadn’t happened, so what they had to say was their central themes of that book were all copied, which taken as a whole should be enough to satisfy the legal test. Because they had to reverse-engineer the evidence to make their case as strong as they could they came up with fifteen or so central themes of their book, which they said were copied across. Ultimately they failed and the court said this idea of thematic copying was not really what copyright’s about.

***Copyright is about protecting the expression of ideas. The way they’re expressed in a literary work. Not the ideas themselves.***

The sorts of IP (Intellectual Property) rights that are engaged to protect ideas are patents, which are there to protect inventions; inventive things that lend a technical development to the market. There’s no IP rights in ideas as such.

# Episode 34 - Into The Woods with John Yorke

*John Yorke is a drama producer, former head of Channel Four Drama, Controller of BBC Drama Production and MD of Company Pictures. He has worked on shows like Shameless, Life On Mars, and the UK's most popular soap opera EastEnders. He is also the author of Into The Woods, a fantastic book on the craft of storytelling...*

## When did you decide to write Into The Woods?

To cut a long story short, I was teaching writing, I created this course at the BBC to teach new writers, and I didn't know what I was doing, because it had always been an instinctive process to me, so I thought I need to know about this.

*I read all the classic screenwriting books and the more I read the more I thought there's something not right here, there's something missing. And the missing was the 'Why?'*

You would get, 'There has to be an inciting incident on page 23', but no one would ever say why. I come from an academic background and you can't write that. If you submitted that as a university thesis you would be told to source it, or to prove it, and none of these books ever proved it.

I didn't know why and I began to posit loads of theories, and try things out, and stumble on something that seems it might be the truth, and writing that down was my attempt to find out the answer to that question.

## How did you get into storytelling yourself?

My father made amateur films and I was the clapperboy in his movies, so it was always around. He read a lot, so novels were always around me, but it was really as a teenager — this is going to date me now — an advert appeared in a British newspaper, ‘Photo love story writers wanted - Will pay £50 a story’. I was a student, I thought that sounds great to me. I wrote a photo love story, sent it to the publishers and they said ‘This is great, can you write another one?’ That’s how I started writing stories.

## How did you make the leap into television?

I got a job as a sound engineer in the BBC. It was that thing of you get in any way you can, and then just network, have a look around, watch everything. I had this amazing three-year apprenticeship where I would run from watching sitcoms being made in TV studios to watching the news being broadcast on Radio Four, and just learning all the time, and then thinking I want to do drama. And then it’s just a question of knocking on doors until some finally say okay we’ll give you a chance. So I did radio drama first of all, I did two or three years of that, then finally got into EastEnders, which is the big British long-running soap opera. Within six months of being there it was kind of, ‘Ah, this is interesting, I know how to do this.’ I was so scared. It was a huge show, at that time it was getting twenty-million viewers a week, so it was really terrifying, but I felt comfortable. Then the storyliner left, the boss said to me we’re a bit stuffed now, we haven’t got anybody, do you want to write the next month’s-worth of storylines? I took a deep breath... I had no idea what I was doing at all. I immediately went out and bought eighty cigarettes and smoked them all immediately... I don’t smoke anymore, I want to make that very clear!

But, you do it. You have no choice. It was brilliant. I storylined it single-handed for a year and a half and it was the best apprenticeship in the world. It teaches you everything about story.

*All the basic techniques are in soap opera. It's not any different. It's slightly bigger, it's slightly more heightened, but in a way that's a really good way to learn craft skills.*

## What were the key storylines during your period on EastEnders?

It was a long time ago, it was the nineties when I was storylining... The Mitchell brothers' big love triangle — Sharongate as it was known — the death of Arthur Fowler, the introduction of Tiffany who became a big star, a few other things like that.

## Arthur Fowler was a beloved character. Who makes the decision to kill him?

In that case it was the actor. He had decided that he had been in it from the beginning, he was getting on a bit and thought it was time to go, which was very sad because we all loved him, he was a great character, but departures give you good stories.

**Sometimes, you just decide to kill people.**

Sometimes, that's because they've really upset you, and sometimes it's because they're not working, and sometimes you really don't want to, but it's a really good story. What it taught me was nobody's indispensable, you've just got to be really good about how you replace them, but if you

replace them correctly, then the show always feels fresh. It was a really good lesson. Don't stick with what you know that works. Reinvent for the future.

## You developed the Roadmap Of Change for your book. How did you develop that?

It emerged slowly. What was obvious from the beginning of doing this was stories seemed to have a common pattern. But that common pattern was defined as three acts. That's useful to a certain extent, but it seemed to me that something else was going on. The tricky thing for most writers is that act two is where people get lost all the time. And the more I started to look at it, I thought there's something... I hadn't quite worked out the significance of the mid-point. I was plugging away. Christopher Vogler in *The Writers' Journey* talks about Joseph Campbell — we used to call it, rather rudely, *Campbell for Dummies* — he started off drawing the roadmap of change, but he only did the first little bit of it. I thought there's more there. Why have you stopped there? I do credit him in the book and make it clear that it came from an original observation from him.

***But what he didn't get, and McKee didn't get, and what Syd Field didn't get was the essentially symmetrical nature of structure.***

Once I'd worked out that the middle was so profoundly important then the roadmap, the journey through the centre of the forest where you find the truth, and then taking that truth back home, that was the eureka moment. A lot of people helped, but the *Writers' Journey* was a really useful clue and you piece it together from there, and then you test it with everything you can find. When you're doing all this stuff you're really prone to confirmation bias all the time; *yes, of course that's right, because it fits!* You have to be really ruthless. My test of this, does Shakespeare do it?

*And the great thing about Shakespeare is he writes very archetypal and you know he never read Syd Field.*

## You break a story into five acts in the Roadmap of Change:

Act 1

No Knowledge

Growing Knowledge

Awakening

Act 2

Doubt

Overcoming Reluctance

Acceptance

Act 3

Experimenting with knowledge

MIDPOINT - KEY KNOWLEDGE

Experimenting post-knowledge

Act 4

Doubt

Growing Reluctance

Regression

Act 5

Reawakening

Re-acceptance

Total Mastery

## When would you advise writers to use this? At the start or after a first draft?

Every writer is different. I'm not saying people should write in five acts. Paul Greengrass asked me, 'Why did Shakespeare write in five acts?' And I didn't know. And you explore and it revealed a pattern, and then you think that pattern is best articulated using five acts. But Shakespeare wrote in five acts because of the theatrical needs of his consumers, so you don't have to write in five acts. It just became a tool on the journey to discovering the essential shape. So that's the first part of the answer.

***The second part of the answer is most great writers would say they write with their heart first. They pour their heart onto the page. They don't structure beforehand. Then they go back and start to use the tools of their craft and chisel away.***

Jimmy McGovern, the great British writer, used to say 'I write my first draft with my heart, I write my second draft with my head.' And you chisel away at the marble and the story reveals itself. Writing is rewriting. But I know a lot of writers who are very methodical and they use five act structure. If you're writing an hour's drama on television, say okay, four commercial breaks, turning points at the end of act one, act two, etc. etc. And they work out those beats. They have a vague idea of the story in their heads and they work out the turning points and then write to fit that. I think it's just the personality type. What's really interesting about this is people like Jimmy eschew structure. People

like Russell T. Davies, they don't like talking about structure, they don't really believe in it. They just write it. And if you read their work, they write perfect structure. That's the greatest proof of all.

***It comes from within. It's the way we all organise the world. And that's all you really need to know. The rest is, how geeky do you want to be? It helps being a geek.***

## What is the purpose of stories and have we always told them in the same way?

This was the really big question: where does it come from? If you look at the roadmap of change you go from no knowledge, to halfway through to key knowledge, and then back to mastery of that knowledge. And that's really the clue to it. Where it comes from is — to cut a long story short — structure is the dramatisation of the process of knowledge assimilation. The dramatisation of the process by which we learn. I exist, I talk to you, I change. You talk to me, you change. You can't not have that interaction with every single thing in the world.

***Child touches fire, ouch, learns not to touch fire again. That's structure.***

The hero's journey is just a metaphor for knowledge assimilation. It's a very hippy-ish, Grateful Dead-ish way of expressing: we learn and we change. And the hero's journey is a really good articulation of that. All these story paradigms, like John Truby's Twenty-Two Steps To Story Structure, they're just metaphors of this shape, and every person who writes a screenwriting book is trying to articulate the same shape we all are, you just find the best metaphor to do it. I chose woods, because it's the fairy tale structure.



***Finding structure is hard the first few times you do it. I think, like riding a bike, it becomes instinctive over time. You have to learn to listen to yourself and listen to your heart and let it tell you I need to go here.***

When I started teaching, about fifteen years ago, I didn't even talk about the middle point at all, because I didn't understand it at that point. Of all the people I've taught they (my first students) are by far the most successful group I've ever taught, because they *found* it. It's great to have, but you can put too much emphasis on it.

***If this stuff becomes a crutch to prop you up, then it stops that extraordinary thing that happens when you look at the world and think I want to write the world down.***

With a structure in place is there a danger that you can shoehorn characters into the structure and make them do things simply because that's where it's supposed to happen?

I think you've got to be prepared to throw all this stuff away. The great writers whose imagination triumphs, whose imagination leads the way, it's then propped up with a skeleton. But what's interesting is often when you're writing what you think is the midpoint *isn't* the midpoint. And what you think is the third act break *isn't* the third act break. But, if you try and force it to be, you get in trouble. What you should do is just write it. I wrote a film a few years ago, which is now being turned into a series on the BBC, and I was convinced the midpoint was thing this and only a year

later when I watched it again I thought oh my God no, it's not that at all, it's *that!* It doesn't matter. The audience isn't going, 'Well, that isn't the midpoint,' because if they are you're in trouble.

## What's the best way start building a character? You mention Ego versus Id; is that the best place to start?

I don't think there's one way to start. There's loads of tricks you can use. The one which I learnt on EastEnders right at the beginning was, can you draw them as a cartoon? And that was brilliant, because immediately you're thinking what am I going to exaggerate? This is what Dickens does, he takes one aspect and exaggerates it, and you get real clarity straight away. If you look at all the great EastEnders characters they're really distinctive types. If they're just that, they're two-dimensional, but once you're there you can then flesh them out.

***The ego and the id thing is something that a writer said to me years ago, that all great characters are contradictions, they're in conflict with themselves the whole time.***

And he talked about Basil Fawlty, seeing himself as this lord of the manor, a man of high class and breeding, which is absurd because he's a bed and breakfast owner in Torquay. The same with Captain Mainwaring in Dad's Army; I am the great officer, of course he's utterly inept and everybody laughs at him.

***That conflict is what fuels a character, between what they think they are and what they really are, is at the root of all storytelling.***

The Godfather's a really great illustration of this. He thinks he's a war hero, but he's much, much darker than that. And the significant point, where he shoots the policeman and the gangster, is the point of the film. That's the lesson. This is who I am. And you see that conflict in his eyes. Bang!

## Do you see any similarities between a good episode of EastEnders and the chapter of a good book?

The thing that you always take with you is you've got to make sure that every sentence makes you want to read the next sentence. Every word makes you want to read the next word. Lee Child does this brilliantly. The Jack Reacher novels are really good illustrations of big, popular storytelling.

***You ask a question and then you don't answer it.***

That's all you're doing. E.M. Forster said exactly the same thing; the only important thing in a story is what happens next. And conversely the only thing that will ruin a story is if you don't care what happens next.

***It's all about the techniques you use to create curiosity and intrigue and defer gratification.***

***The more you do that, the more populist the novel will be.***

That's just good, standard technique and that applies to the novel as much as the potboiler. The other thing you look for in a story is do enough people want to be that character? 'Where do you place your heart?' is the key thing I ask in every script I ever develop. Who do I love? Who's my hero? And do I want to be them? And if you don't, then no one else is going to want to be them. Do you want to be Al Pacino in The Godfather? Of course you do. Because there's something extraordinarily attractive that taps into your dark side. Even if it's got a dark ending, I don't care. I

remember seeing *The Godfather* in the cinema, and every male came strutting out of the cinema, thinking 'Can I grease my hair back?' It's that, it's James Bond. Every boy wants to be James Bond, as young girls a few years ago wanted to be Hannah Montana. Their journey taps into your deepest desires. That's seems to be really important, the ubiquity of the Cinderella story, the Ugly Duckling story. We all deep down think we're pretty useless and people are laughing at us and we're a bit crap, but if only I could prove... you'd see! That story is so seductive. You get that a lot. You want to go on a walk, if you're comfortable with the person taking you for a walk, and the journey in sight feels like somewhere appealing — it doesn't have to be a nice story, it could be the darkest tales of revenge, because we all feel those things, too; they're all laughing at me, I'm going to kill them. You shouldn't be formulaic about it, but Jack Reacher is the wandering knight errant who brings justice to forlorn communities, just like David Carradine did in *Kung Fu* forty years ago. When I was a kid, David Carradine and *Kung Fu* was the coolest thing on the planet.

Writers often get notes to make characters more likeable, but they don't need to be likeable, they need to be intriguing.

It used to be like that all the time in telly, but that's because telly depended on mass audience, and so you tried not to offend anybody, but since cable and video on demand has taken off, since the Sopranos in particular, that changed a lot, and there's a much greater understanding that you don't have to be nice. Nice is really boring. Russell T Davies' advice is don't think about it. Just write. I think in a sense he's right; if you love them, the audience will love them. And that's all you have to worry about.

## We're writing a female protagonist. How do you approach that yourself?

It's such a big question. I just think of people I know and try and imagine what it's like to be them.

***It's the process of empathy; you try and imagine what it's like to be someone else.***

If you're good at that, then it works. It's weird now, because there's this whole thing of cultural appropriation where people say 'Well, you can't tell their story, you can't dress like that.' I find it all slightly sad, really, because as humans, what makes a society is to imagine what it's like to be someone else. That's what empathy is. And if you say we can't empathise with them, or go into that culture... If you're good, why can't you? If you're bad and do it, then no one will read it, but if you're good don't be daunted by that. There are plenty of wonderful books written by men about women, and there are amazing books written by women about men. It's just a question of observing and being attuned.

## Exposition is a minefield for writers. What are the best ways of conveying exposition?

In drama there's a few quick fixes. The easy one is have an ingénue. Have someone in there who's like the reader, who doesn't know, and then someone's got a reason to tell them all that information. Every brand new drama series always starts with the rookie, and the rookie's there to be told the stuff we need to know.

The second way is through conflict. To get information across, have an argument. Then exposition is weaponised. The problem with exposition in real life is there's no real desire to say anything inherently dramatic, but if you have an argument then the exposition gets disguised. It has a desire attached to it. All writing is about desire. The protagonist always wants something, so if you give your exposition a desire — 'For God's sake, give up smoking!' — then I know you smoke.

***I write video games as well and they've learnt how to hide exposition. Just reveal exposition through inference: you go through the story, you work it out, and what the characters are doing.***

That's the more skilled version. In the book I do a little history of exposition. It goes all the way back to the Prologue in ancient Greece who says, 'Here is our scene, we're at war with these people...' Then you get to the nineteenth century and the whole table dusting thing where you get two maids who say, 'You'll never guess what so-and-so's been up to!' Writing now, at its best, the exposition is invisible, which is what you want. You don't want to know that you're being given information.

## Can your story have too many characters? And how many characters should a story focus on?

It depends on what you're trying to achieve. There have been so many great gang shows on television, like ER or The West Wing, that will have six protagonists. That works really well. Decide if your show is a multi-protagonist show. A dual-protagonist show? A Starsky and Hutch? Or is it a single protagonist show? If you get beyond six it gets quite hard for the audience to focus on who they're being involved with and why they should care. But a great writer could probably find a way

to write six or ten. It also depends on the duration of the story. With six you see, even then, structural patterns.

*Those six are different facets of one personality. You have the brainy one, the impetuous one, you have the father figure, you have the rookie, and you put them all together and you've got one protagonist. I knew one guy who used to build his characters around the personalities of the Beatles.*

If you're running a soap opera you have a huge cast of characters to choose from. Is it a case of giving the writer a family or a character to focus on for each episode?

The episodes are storylined so the writer will know what's expected of them. It can be a paragraph, it can be a page, it can be two pages. When I ran EastEnders we had five storylines in each episode. You'd have two A stories — which is a bit silly really — two big stories, a B story, a C story and a tiny little D story, and that was the same every week. You'd say, this is the episode where Grant discovers that Sharon has been having sex with Phil, or whatever, and you'd give them that, say here's where it starts, here's where it ends, go off and write it. And their job is to join the dots. Soap writing is a real skill; joining the dots. Outside of that, you used to go to the writers and say we need a new family, can you create a new family for us? And the best writers would go off and do that and that would give you something.

## Do you have any tips for switching between storylines?

Years ago I read Iain Banks' The Crow Road and thought God, this is brilliant because every single chapter I was desperate to carry on, and he always went somewhere else, and I was really annoyed for about thirty seconds, then it was, oh, this is really interesting as well.

That's the trick isn't it? It's really useful deferring gratification. I'll just go over there. You hold back the answer. You put someone in jeopardy. You cut away. You can formulate rules, but I think most people do it instinctively. You know, at some point, that's enough there. Let's leave him alone, I need to go over here. It's trial and error. What's interesting is if you do it like that, with hindsight you'll go back and you'll find a pattern. I think what you're doing when you're writing is chiselling away at marble to find the story that's in there. If you look at the very first episode of ER, Michael Crichton's amazing script for ER, there's six characters, it's ninety minutes long, and I studied it for two years thinking, 'How has he done this?' And then finding it. There is a really clear, really simple shape at its heart.

## How do you study scripts? Is there a method you use?

When I started doing this I really did go to the cinema with a pad of paper and a stopwatch. I couldn't work it, and I thought I would time everything and explore it. I think it's like doctors and x-rays. If I look at an x-ray I just like *bleurgh*. But a doctor will look at it and go, 'There's a carcinoma on your lung.' And the more you do it, the more you know what to look for, and you start to be able to see stories very quickly. So it's very unusual for me now to see something and not be able to see its structure pretty quickly. But when you're watching it you try really hard not to think about it, because that means it's not very good. It should be fun, and the structure bit comes afterwards.



# What have you learned about the importance of cliffhangers?

It's a subversion of expectation either of the audience or the protagonist at the last second. It goes back to Greek drama.

***The Greeks called it peripeteia and anagnorisis: reversal and discovery. It's as old as that, it's a basic unit of dramatic structure.***

Something is confronted by its opposite that flips what you thought you knew on its head at the last minute. It's a brilliant device. It's the crisis point of the scene, which means you go, 'Oh no, don't leave them there!' That's what you want. It's an extraordinarily powerful thing. In soaps, people can look at it as a cheap and meretricious device, and it can be if it's used badly. It's like the 1960s Batman: Batman would be about to die and then next week you'd realise that the whole thing was ridiculous and obviously he was never in any peril at all. You've got to pay it off cleverly, in an intelligent way that's surprising yet somehow feels true. They're very hard to do. When you're planning something like EastEnders, you put a lot of work into that.

***The really simple way of looking at it, is you reverse-engineer. Okay, that's my ending; I'm going to write against that.***

The master is Aaron Sorkin. There's that wonderful episode of The West Wing where someone's tried to assassinate the President's party, and you're in President Bartlett's limousine, and he seems pretty worried, 'What about Zoe? I think Zoe's been shot, we've gotta turn round, we've gotta go get her,' and there's about three minutes of thinking, Oh, what a great guy, he's really

worried about his daughter and staff... and then suddenly you realise he's been shot. It's an amazing moment: bang into the credits, and you're just *there*. Aaron Sorkin does it all the time. He's a master craftsman.

Do you think in terms of emotion? This is how I want the audience to feel...

Yeah, I think so. It's not often consciously articulated. Tom Stoppard talks brilliantly about this, 'A writer's job is to organise information and release it in the right order to solicit the emotional response you require.'

***A comedy can be exactly the same story as a tragedy, but the information will be released in a different order. That's all it is, really; working out when to release information for maximum desired effect.***

So much of writing is... I'm not going to tell them that yet, I'm not going to let them know he's her uncle, because when I *do* reveal that at the end of the fourth act it'll have *this* effect. It's always variations on suspense or surprise.

***New writers want to explain everything. And it's about learning to withhold, withhold, and intrigue...***

And it's also learning to lie to the audience, that's the real skill. The subtle way in which you lead an audience to infer a deep untruth, so then later on you can reveal it and they can get, Oh, of course! It's why Agatha Christie was brilliant. The example I give in the book is the police are investigating a house fire, a mum and two children were badly injured, the woman had recently gone through a

difficult divorce... so you immediately infer that it's the husband. And of course the twist is it's either the mum who set fire to the house, or if you're really sick it's one of the kids. There you've got instant story.

## When should you hold back crucial story information for suspense?

It depends on what emotional effect you want to have. Hitchcock always said that was far superior to surprise. He thought surprise was cheap, even though he used it a lot. Psycho was quite surprising at times. It's the bomb under the table. If you tell the audience there's a bomb under the table, but don't tell the characters, you are glued as they talk inanely about last week's football match. You're sitting there going, 'Oh my God, there's a bomb under the table!' If that's the effect you want, then that's absolutely fine. Chekov would not be Chekov if Chekov did that. He would talk about the football match, and you would infer subtly their relationship over the ages from that conversation. That's the effect Chekov wanted. I think the more populist you are, the more that surprise and suspense becomes really important, and not to be sniffed at. It's an amazing technique used in the right hands.

***I started off looking at narrative in television and you realise they have to be the same for everything or not at all. The only difference between narrative in a book and narrative in a theatre is the mode of consumption. The story is fundamentally the same. I started looking at it in other areas, partly because I was asked to and partly because I found it fascinating, we do storytelling for business, I spend a lot of time working with advertising agencies, honing their stories, we do storytelling for the novel, we do storytelling for video game, you start to realise after a while there are so many applications in narrative.***

# Episode 35 - The Incredible

## Tenacity Of Mark Edwards

*Mark Edwards is the bestselling author of psychological thrillers such as [The Magpies](#), which has sold over 300,000 copies. Mark is an author who has been self-published, trad-published, and is now one of Amazon's Thomas & Mercer imprint's bestselling authors with five number one bestsellers. His extraordinary story will be an inspiration to any writer who's ever faced rejection, bad publishing, bad agents, and financial ruin!*

You had a rocky start, is that fair to say?

It took me a long time to get anywhere. It's like a rollercoaster with tearjerking moments. I started writing in my early twenties, and this was back in the nineties when you had to do the whole Writers' & Artists' Yearbook thing, sending off synopses and sample chapters in envelopes. I got an agent quite early on, it only took me a few months to find an agent, and then I spent years and years and years with my agent, trying to get me a deal with a publisher, and failing, until that agent eventually dumped me. Then I met Louise Voss — this was around 1999 — because I appeared on a BBC documentary about aspiring writers. They had three writers; Jake Arnott, who was the successful one, they had somebody who didn't have an agent, and they had me in the middle. They filmed my manuscript being biked across London, they tried to sex-up the submissions process, which is actually quite hard to do.

***There were these shots of me strolling moodily along Hastings beach looking sad, because my book had been rejected.***

The one good thing that came out of this programme — because it didn't lead to a deal, which I thought it might — is that I got an email from Louise Voss who was in the same boat as me, and she went on to get a book deal with Transworld, and I still couldn't get one. A few years after we met we decided to write a novel together — this was in 2002 — that got optioned by BBC Drama, but was not picked up by a publisher. I got back from Japan, where I had been living when we wrote this first book. We wrote another book. By this time Louise had lost her publishing deal and her agent, so we were both back in the wilderness again — this was 2006, I think — so I had been trying for about twelve years by this point. Then I just kind of gave up for a few years. I had quite a good job by then, and I was starting to have kids, and I was putting my energy into my career, until 2010 when Amazon launched the Kindle in the UK and they launched KDP. I said to Louise, why don't we take these two books that we've written, update them and self-publish them and see what happens? She was really reluctant and thought we'd sell maybe two or three copies and it would be really embarrassing, but I persuaded her to do it.

***We did the whole self-publishing thing: we edited the books, we did the covers, and, to cut a very long story short, one of those books, *Catch Your Death*, got to number one on Kindle UK, and the other one, *Killing Cupid*, got to number two.***

For a whole month in 2011 we were number one and two on the Kindle chart. It was so exciting, after all these years of trying to get people to read stuff that I had done, to suddenly be selling thousands of books... And it wasn't just that, because self-publishing was a big story in the media at that time, and we were the first British authors to be fully-independent and to get to number one, we got loads of media interest. We were on BBC Breakfast, all the newspapers, Sky News. It was

like a whirlwind of excitement. We then had agents approaching us — agents who had previously turned us down — and the agent that we signed with got us a six-figure four book deal with HarperCollins. I thought, well it's going to be really easy from now on, and the dreams that I'd had for a long time were going to come to fruition, but it didn't turn out like that. What happened was that they republished the two books that had been Kindle hits in 2012 and they didn't do anywhere near as well as they thought they would. It was disappointing for everybody. The two other books came out in 2013 and basically didn't get into any shops, they weren't stocked anywhere, they didn't get any interest from anybody, and we knew that they were going to drop us, but we didn't want to continue to be published by them anyway, because the whole thing had just gone so badly.

## What happened after you left HarperCollins?

The third book had just come out at the beginning of 2013 and — I can laugh about it now — I was actually in quite dire straits. I had given up my day job to become a full-time writer, I had taken that gamble. We moved out of London, because we couldn't afford to buy anywhere in London and we moved up to Wolverhampton, which is where my wife is from, and we bought a house and I had run out of money by this point. I was doing some freelance work, I lived in a place where there weren't any jobs in the industry I had been working in before, I was hugely in debt, my overdraft was maxed-out, my credit cards were maxed-out, my wife was pregnant with our third child — bad planning, as usual! — and I was having sleepless nights worrying about money and also feeling really down about what had happened to my writing career, because it was the only thing I had ever really wanted to do. And after having had this taste of success and hope, it felt like it had all gone horribly, horribly wrong.

***I had this book called *The Magpies*, which had been sitting in my drawer for a long time.***

In fact, I only had a copy of it because I had once emailed it to my wife, and she still had it in her Hotmail inbox from two years before. I might have had an old printed copy in the loft that I could have scanned, I'm not even sure. That was one of the miracles that happened, that she hadn't deleted this email. I don't think she had even read it! I said to Louise, I'm going to self-publish this book, maybe I can do it again. I figured out that if I sold twenty-thousand copies at £1.99 on the 70% royalty rate, I would just about make enough to pay off my tax bill and clear my debts and get my head back above water. So, I published *The Magpies* in March 2013. We had a few hundred people on a Facebook page by this time, so I had a launch party with those who had read the Voss and Edwards books. It was a small group, but they were very enthusiastic. I sold a hundred-and-fifty copies on the first day. It was doing okay, but then it started to drop down the charts. I remember, very clearly, waking up on Good Friday and looking at my ranking. I used to be horrifically addicted to checking my ranking and my Kindle sales, because KDP sales refresh live, which is terrible for somebody like me who gets addicted very easily. I checked my ranking and it had really slid overnight and I thought this isn't going to work. It was so much harder by 2013 than it had been in 2011 to sell eBooks if you were self-published. And then this amazing thing happened.

***I started checking the sales and I could see lots of sales coming in. Ten came in. Then twenty. Then thirty.***

They were rolling in, really, really fast, and I started checking my ranking, which only refreshes every hour-and-a-half to two hours, and during that day it sold something like one thousand five hundred copies and it shot to something like number thirty in the charts. To say that I was excited and relieved would be a huge understatement.

***The next day it sold fifteen-hundred again and it just kept climbing and climbing and climbing up the chart.***

## What happened?

I think Amazon had sent an email to everybody who had ever bought one of my books before, and enough of them had bought *The Magpies* to send it shooting up the charts. That's what you have to do, you have to sell a lot in a short space of time to send books up the rankings. This has happened before where they shoot up the charts because an email goes out, but then they just drop out again. It happens all the time, every day. But for some reason *The Magpies* stuck and it just kept going up and up and up. It got to number two and it stuck at number two for about a month, because there was a book that cost 59p at number one! And I couldn't shift it off the top spot and it was driving me crazy, and then all these daily deals would come along, overtaking us both. Eventually, this 59p book went up, it dropped down to number two and I went up to number one! It was really exciting.

We discussed the Guardian piece by an anonymous author who had given up after two books and four years of rejections:

I'd written five or six books by then, maybe even more, plus the two I wrote with Louise, and I have five or six that will never see the light of day that I wrote back in the nineties.

***You have to have the tenacity. If you really want to do it, you've got to love writing.***



I read that article and didn't have any sympathy for that person. I even wondered if it was real, and I'm sure it was. Let's face it, publishers' slush piles are absolutely sky high, and if one writer drops out it makes it a tiny bit easier for all the others.

When you were writing with Louise Voss, what was the trigger that sent your books to number one (and two)?

It was actually a slow climb that first time in 2011. I was spending two or three hours every day doing whatever I could to try and get sales. A lot of it was blogging. I wasn't doing much on social media at the time.

***I had a blog where I had lots of guest authors. I tried to befriend as many successful indie authors as I could.***

My theory was that if I could bring them and their readers to my website... it's quite similar to what you're doing! There were readers out there who were willing to read indie books and if I could reach their readers, hopefully you would get a few a day and start to pick up reviews, something starts to happen in the Amazon algorithm in the background that you can't really see and the book becomes more visible on Amazon and hopefully more people will click through the buy it. And you know on Amazon you have the *people-who-bought-this-book-also-bought...* strip that goes across the page? Our books started to appear on more and more of those, and on books that were going up into the top ten. So, suddenly people who were looking at those books could see our book as well, and that's when it really started to make a difference and the book started to climb up the charts. Then I think what happened then was that we had this first book, *Killing Cupid*, out for a few

months and then we released the second book, *Catch Your Death*, and I'm sure that they did then what they did later with *The Magpies*, and they sent out an email to the people who bought the first book and lots of them bought the second book *Catch Your Death* on the same day and that sent it up and it overtook book one and went to number one on the charts.

## Did you also have a mailing list at the time?

No, even though my day job at the time was email marketing I didn't get around to setting-up my own mailing list, which is ridiculous! I've got one now and I'm always trying to drive people to sign-up to it by giving away short stories and so on. I try and get as many people to like my Facebook and to join the email list as possible. To a lesser degree there's Twitter, and I'm just starting on Instagram. There's a huge book community on Instagram. It's probably better than Twitter for reaching readers.

## What other skills did you bring to bear from your marketing background?

I worked in direct marketing, really, and the thing that I learned was don't do anything unless you can measure its effectiveness, and don't waste time doing things that aren't going to have any impact. The biggest problem that I, and most other writers, have is that we're time-poor. We're being asked to do lots and lots of things. Obviously, the most important thing is to write the books and write them well.

***With the rest of the time that you've got I think it's really important to only do the things that are going to have an impact.***

You can experiment and if something seems to work, then keep doing it and more of it. You can spend half a day writing a blog post that ten people will read and it's just a total waste of time. I'm always arguing with PR people about what I should be spending my time doing.

***To me it's more important to take five minutes to answer a reader email, or to spend a few hours catching up with reader emails and communicating with current readers than it is to put out loads of tweets about my new book, or to write blog posts, because it's so hard to get people to read them.***

Blog tours are popular at the moment. They might not be great for sales, but they're good for getting your name out there...

I think it's really important to develop good relationships with book bloggers and reviewers. They are the champions for authors who will help spread the word, and I spend a lot of time networking with people, chatting with people, on Twitter and Facebook and so on. It's important to be nice to people and be personable and be part of the community. I think that really helps, because if you can befriend people and network with people it's a fun thing to do, but it also helps you, because if you have people on your side who are going to shout about your books then that's worthwhile. I'm not saying that blog tours are a waste of time, but you've got to be careful about how you spend your time. That's the main thing I've brought over from my marketing background.

***I'm always reluctant to do things that I can't measure the impact of.***

If I was in charge of a marketing department at a publisher I'd be reluctant to put posters up on the street, because you can't tell how effective they are, whereas spending money on a Bookbub email you can tell exactly how effective it is.

## What are the biggest differences between being published by Thomas & Mercer and your early days?

I prefer being published than I do self-publishing. I haven't self-published anything since *The Magpies* four years ago. Everything that I've done since has all been through Thomas & Mercer and the process is very similar to how it was with HarperCollins. I like working with an editor. For me, being part of that team, getting the editorial input, talking through ideas, having somebody else design the covers... and they do the marketing, I don't really do the marketing anymore at all, except for running my Facebook Group and my mailing list and doing some social media stuff, because the writing is the bit that I really enjoy, and it's by far the most important part.

***I didn't quit my job in marketing to becoming a marketer for myself, I did it because I wanted to be a writer.***

I like as much as possible to spend my time working on the books. That's the problem with self-publishing, because you have to do everything yourself you are spending a lot more time doing all the kind of admin and promotional stuff. Whether it's formatting books, or changing your pricing, or whatever it is, organising promotions. Amazon publishing do all of that for me, which is great. They've got a direct line to the people who buy my books. They know everybody who's ever bought one of my books. They probably know what page they've read up to on their Kindle, they know who's looked at the page and who's bought and who hasn't. I would love to get my hands on that data, but I can't see it.

## When you were doing the writing and marketing, how did you split your time?

I wasn't doing any writing at that point. I basically took a few months where I just did marketing. In fact, there was about six months when we self-published *Killing Cupid* and *Catch Your Death* and I didn't do any writing at all. I only did marketing on top of my day job and parenting. It was only after we got that deal with HarperCollins and needed to write a new book that I swung back completely the other way and nearly only doing writing. I think it took me a while to get the balance right. Now, I spend 70% of my working time writing, and 30% doing all the other admin, which includes marketing and social media, but also accounts and things like that.

I love running my Facebook page. Apart from the writing itself, that's my favourite thing to do. I'll put a post on there and it's like having a group of cheerleaders. I might be having a bad day and I'll put something on there: a competition or a giveaway, or an update about a book that I'm working on, and you'll get loads of people saying, 'I can't wait to read it,' and getting really excited. It's great, it really spurs you on if you're having a bad day. Even if you're having a good day it makes you feel better. I don't see that as any kind of hardship whatsoever, communicating with readers. I can't imagine what it must have been like in the olden days when you had to answer letters, put a stamp on them... It must have been really strange when there was no internet and you couldn't communicate with people very easily and there was no such thing as Amazon reviews... actually that must have been better!

# What advice do you have for getting reviews on Amazon?

It used to be that there were lots of bloggers out there who would accept indie books, and you would get reviews from them and they would post them on Amazon and Goodreads. It's much harder now to get self-published books reviewed by the bloggers. There are still people out there who will do it, but what we did back then was approach these reviews sites and blogs. Now I've got an existing audience I will do giveaways of advance copies in the couple of months before the book comes out. I'll run a competition on Facebook, for example, and say that I'm giving away ten/twenty digital copies of this book, and people clamour for them, and I'll send them out and make sure that I can get twenty or thirty reviews on day one. You can put books on [Netgalley](#) as well to get reviews. You have to pay to go on Netgalley, I'm not sure how much it costs, but it is important.

***People try and game the system and get their friends and family to write reviews, but Amazon will know that if someone you're friends with on Facebook writes and review and they'll block it, because they use cookies to track it.***

Everything's been much easier since *The Magpies*. I've become a full-time writer, and I've had five number ones on Kindle UK, and I've had another book out called *Follow You Home* which has sold over half a million copies each, it's my biggest seller. I think when you talk about becoming a bestseller, it's not just about your debut, or your first book.

***That's actually when the hard work really starts.***

Everybody's interested in debut authors, it's like when you have your first baby: everyone's really excited, they all come round, and you put photos on Facebook and you get hundreds of likes. By

the time you've had your third or fourth child... everyone's like, 'Not another one!' Keeping that interest going and keeping readers on board is much, much harder. And I really like authors, like Sarah Pinborough, who've put the work in and had maybe five or six books published and then they have their big breakout hit. A lot of that's because they've got a lot of goodwill in the industry, and they've built-up a fan base. Having a bestseller with your first book is really hard.

You don't have a series character, do you? Your books are standalones. Does that make it harder for you, or is it a good way to get new readers on board?

I think it is a good way of getting new readers. My feeling with series is you're always going to working with diminishing returns; people won't read book two unless they've read book one, and they won't read book three unless they've read book two and so on. If you keep going and get to a certain point, like Ian Rankin did, or Lee Child did, there must be a tipping point where that series suddenly becomes successful and you know that people are going to keep buying book after book after book. That's the Holy Grail, I guess. I have started a couple of series where the sales of the second book have been less than the first book, so it felt pointless writing a third book. Also, I prefer to write standalones, because I like to have a self-contained story.

***I was always a big Stephen King fan and most of his big books, especially when I was reading him in the eighties, they were all standalones and I guess that's just the way that I think: I like to write a book that has an ending, or a slightly open ending.***

And people are always emailing me and want to know what happens after *The Magpies*. What happened to these characters? There's always a twist right at the end and people want to know

what happens next. But I think it's good to leave people thinking about it and wanting more. That, for me, is where the story naturally ends. It's partly a commercial decision, but mainly a creative decision to write standalones. Having said that, I am thinking about writing a short sequel to *The Magpies*, just to wrap things up. Maybe a novella. I've got a character called Lucy Newton, who's in *The Magpies*, she's the main baddie, and people are obsessed with this character, they want to know what happens. She's like an evil Amazonian woman and she really struck a chord with readers. She makes a cameo in every one of my books. If you read my books chronologically there are little Easter eggs in all the book.

## Like a Mark Edwards Universe?

Yeah, I love doing that. There's always a Lucy Newton reference in the books. I've got a private detective, who's the main character in *Follow You Home*, and he makes a couple of smaller appearances elsewhere. There's companies and brands that appear. I love doing it and I know readers love it as well. Although they can be read as standalones, I like that there is this universe that regular readers will get something extra from reading it.

## When do you come up with your titles?

I either come up with them immediately, the second I come up with a synopsis. Or I agonise for months and months and months, trying to come up with one. And the best ones are the ones that come instantly. What usually happens is I'll come up with one, I'll say to Amazon 'That's a working title, don't use it,' and they'll say, 'We really like it,' and they'll use it. *The Devil's Work* was meant to just be a punny working title for the book, but they really liked it. I'm writing a book at the moment which is set at a writers' retreat and I'm going to call it *The Retreat*, and that's what it's going to be called even though I've spent months trying to come up with other titles.



## Do you ever test titles with your Facebook group?

No, I will ask other authors that I know, and they will nearly always like the one that the publisher doesn't like. They always like the slightly more arty, esoteric title, and the publisher likes the one that's got 'Girl' in it.

## How far in advance do you get the cover art created?

I've only ever really done it with three. With *Catch Your Death* and *Killing Cupid* we already had the books before we looked at the covers, and I just went onto stock photo sites. With *Killing Cupid* I found quite a controversial picture, because I thought it would grab people's attention. The original self-published version of Killing Cupid had a very stylised picture of a woman lying on her back, scantily clad with a gun in her hand and these rose petals all around her head. It didn't have anything to do with the book whatsoever.

***Louise really didn't like the image. It was too strong, but I said it would grab people's attention and it did.***

With *The Magpies*. The HarperCollins version of *Catch Your Death* had a photo on the front that had been taken by a photographer. I befriended the photographer and she let me have this photo for free to put on the cover of *The Magpies* a year or two later. If you go and look at The Magpies on Amazon, it's still this cover; it's a woman in a nightdress sitting in the woods. It had nothing to do with the content of the book whatsoever, but it signifies that it's a creepy, psychological thriller.

***It conjures the atmosphere of the book, rather than the content.***

It's got wintry trees. You can't go wrong on a psychological thriller with wintry trees. I gave that photo to my sister-in-law, who's a graphic designer, and she did the rest. The font: she cut out lettering, screwed it up and then stuck it to the photo and took a photo and that's we created the Mark Edwards font that we've stuck with ever since. Covers are really important. The product description is also incredibly important. Another thing that I did, when *Killing Cupid* was self-published we were constantly rewriting that description to try and improve sales. I used to tweak it a lot, and back in those days you could see what percentage of people had visited your page would go on to buy the book. You can't any more. By changing that description, within an hour sales had doubled.

## What did you do?

I made it much punchier and more straightforward. I think the original description was a bit long-winded and so I studied what other successful books were doing and re-wrote the blurb in a much more intriguing way. And I still write the blurbs for my books now because I enjoy doing it, and I think I'm quite good at it, because I know exactly how to hook people in. Some books work better than others. I think the Follow You Home description is especially good, because people read that and they want to know more. It basically says a couple have gone into the woods, seen something creepy, and people read it and want to know what they've seen, and I'm sure that's why so many people have bought that book, because they read the description and immediately want to know what that couple saw in the woods that's so scary.

***That's part of writing a bestseller. The set-up has to be really intriguing and capture people's imaginations. If you can describe your book in a sentence, or even a few words, that really helps.***

# How many words would you use in a blurb?

Just a couple of hundred. The quicker you can get the message across, the better. Three paragraphs, or two, if you can. I joke about this, but I'm actually quite serious.

***I used to be able to describe all of my books in three words... two of which were always 'from hell'. 'Neighbours from hell', 'Girlfriend from hell', 'Holiday from hell', 'Office from hell'.***

They were my first four psychological thrillers. All you have to do is say that and people know exactly what they're about. I've now made life harder for myself, because I can't describe my new book in three words. It's about a serial killer who makes his victims happy before he kills them.

The other problem is how much do I give away in the description? I don't want to give away too much. The reader knows the killer's motivation before the police in the book do, because it's the hook of the book, I've had to put it up front that's what the motivation of the killer is. If it was revealed in a twist, it would be much harder to sell.

***One of the things I do is before I start writing a book is I'll write a blurb for it.***

Just a page, so it will be a slightly longer version of the blurb that will appear on the Amazon page, and then I constantly refer back to that to make sure that I'm sticking to the original idea and that I'm not veering off. I think it really helps. I think sometimes when you're deep in the book you can go off into all these tangents and get a bit lost, but if you can come back to 'What's the core of this idea?' and try and keep focused, then writing that blurb really helps. It's really important, along with the first reviews. Those most helpful reviews in particular that appear on the first Amazon page are really important.

***They don't necessarily have to be good reviews. People will buy books where the reviews are very divided.***

If you look at books like *Fifty Shades Of Grey* or *Gone Girl*, even *The Girl On The Train*, often the most helpful reviews is a real mix of five and one or two star reviews. I think readers like that. If you can divide readers' opinions, then that makes readers more intrigued. Also, they're suspicious if they see blanket four and five star reviews. They think the authors' friends and family must have done this. People like the idea of making their own minds up.

***That's another thing; have a book that divides opinions. Most bestsellers really divide opinion.***

Word of mouth is so important. You need to have some scenes in the book that will stick in people's minds, even if the scene seems a bit crazy or out there or completely bonkers, keep it in.

***If you write a scene and you think, Oh no, that's too strong, or it's too controversial... keep it in. It's the one that people will remember.***

In *Because She Loves Me* there's a scene where a couple have sex in a freezing cold pond in Brockwell Park in London. And I wrote it and thought I'm going to have to delete that because it's so ridiculous, how can he get it up in that pond? But actually, it's the scene in the book that everybody talks to me about. In *The Magpies* there's a scene where a load of spiders invade a flat. I wrote that scene and thought this is too crazy, even though it's based on something that actually happened, where I used to go out with this arachnophobic woman and one night we had about twenty spiders run across the living room floor and she was going mental. And I put this into *The Magpies*, but really ramped it up, and I'd say out of all my books that's the scene people mention to

me more than anything else, because they remember those spiders, and they picture them in their heads as being big horror movie spiders.

The other thing is make sure you have a really good ending that people remember. I'm going to mention Sarah Pinborough again, because that's why that book's been so successful because you read it and you immediately want to talk to people about it. Don't be bland, don't be wishy-washy, take risks. I think all of the best books take risks. And don't be scared of some people hating your book.

***It's much better to be loved and hated than to just be liked.***

## Do you ever beta-test your books?

No, I don't. I will just work with my editor. There's two people at Amazon, including my editor, who will read it. There's the editorial director and the editor. They will give feedback and my agent will give feedback, but apart from that... Oh, my wife is my beta-reader, actually! She reads them before anyone else and always gives me very good feedback. And I'm not just saying that, she's a very good and honest reader, which I think is important. But the thought of a kind of committee or group coming back to me with feedback is kind of horrifying to me. I've never been a member of a writers' group. For that reason I would hate to stand up and read out something and have people give opinions about it and critique it. I don't think it works.

***One of the good things about co-writing is that you have somebody to instantly give you feedback.***

That helps because it gives you more freedom, you're willing to take more risks. When you write on your own, you have no idea if what you're writing is any good or not. When you're writing with

somebody else, someone whose opinion you trust, and who's honest with you, then it's really helpful, I think. In the absence of having a co-writer I think it's good to find one person you really trust to give you feedback, but otherwise I would use a professional. An editor. If you send out to a load of beta-readers and they all say the same thing, then maybe they're onto something, but I imagine most of them would come back with completely contradictory feedback.

## What's your ideal pre-order period?

Because I'm not self-published, so I don't control pre-orders or when the book appears on Amazon or anything. They put it up about six months before the book is actually released. It quietly goes up and nobody knows it's there. I'm never sure what's the best thing to do with pre-orders because I worry that if you get a steady trickle of pre-orders in the months leading up to release then that will dilute the first day or first week's sales, which will help shoot you up the charts.

***I don't encourage people to pre-order. I prefer to have a big bang when the book comes out and try and get as many sales on day one as possible.***

What usually happens is Amazon will send out an email to a few people a couple of months before the book comes out and it will go up into the hundreds. I don't see my pre-order numbers. I never know what they are until after the book's out. I will put all of my effort into launch day and I will do loads on launch day. I will do a big Facebook party, I'll be on Twitter all day, I'll send emails to my mailing list, I will try and think... *imagine* the book up the charts!

## What is a Facebook party? Is there cake and balloons?

I think people do sit there with cake. I will sit on Facebook for a few hours. I'll set up a Facebook event, and then I'll invite people to it and I'll advertise it on my page and then I will basically just be on Facebook typing furiously for a few hours answering questions, running competitions, trying to get people excited. I have guest authors come in and do giveaways. This year I'm thinking of doing a Facebook Live video, which I haven't done before, and see how that goes. Last one I did I was flying to America the next day, so I had to do my launch sitting in a hotel on my own in Heathrow. It was a bit sad! I felt like I had hundreds of people there with me, celebrating the launch of this book, because they were all there on Facebook being really enthusiastic.

## On selling over two million books...

I constantly live in a state of fear. I can never sit back on my laurels and think I've made it now. You've got to keep going and going and going. I want to be doing this for the rest of my life, or until I can swan off to live on a tropical island somewhere.

# Episode 36 - Susan Kaye Quinn

## For Love Or Money

*Susan Kaye Quinn is not only a genuine rocket scientist, but she's also a bestselling indie author who runs the incredible For Love Or Money Facebook group, an incredible resource for any indie author and a safe place to ask all those questions you might otherwise be too scared to ask. We covered so much when talking to her, that we had to split the interview into two parts. Here's part one:*

### How did you get started writing?

I was an engineer, did a lot of research for NASA, got my PhD, I was a really serious nerd. I really loved that work, I had a really great time with it, and then I had my kids and it was really hard to do both at the same time, especially as I had three of them. I ended up staying home for a while, I really needed to get back, and I always thought I would go back to engineering, and I was casting about for 'What's phase two going to look like...?' I'd always loved reading, of course, and I always loved writing, but I had never self-identified as a writer. I sat down to write and literally the next day it was like I was hooked on heroin, and I was just fabulously enamoured immediately and wrote like a demon for months and months and months. I thought I had better make a career out of this because I clearly can't stop. It just grew from there.

***I'm very lucky that I came in as a new writer right when the revolution was happening.***

I didn't self-publish my first book. I went through a small press, and had the classic horrible experience, and it was not at all what I expected, and it was right when the wave of indie publishing in late 2011 started to crest, and there was a whole group of us who got off the treadmill of



traditional publishing and went into indie and took the leap. It's really interesting now to look back. Some of us left, some of us still on top, and it's a really interesting dynamic and really fascinating to watch unfold. The people who had the hardest time with the transition were the people who had been doing it a long time, and I didn't have that baggage. I was coming into fresh anyway, and I did the calculus and thought I could make it work. I lucked into doing everything right, then figured it out later: oh, I did exactly what I needed to do, just without realising it. I got a little more methodical about it as time went on.

***The indie community is so sharing, caring and supportive, and I love that. It feeds my artist's soul, so much.***

And I'm also this twenty-first century open source person that I buy into that philosophy. I mates really well and I'm having a great time with it. The hardest thing for me is I have too many things I want to do, and bouncing time is the key to everything.

You had a bad experience with a small press, so  
would you advise all authors to self-publish?

Absolutely. I don't recommend small presses to anyone. It's not just based on my own personal experience. I know a lot of writers and I draw on their experience. I know New York Times bestsellers, people who have sold for five years and never broken even, I have several friends who are still with the small press that I started out with, and others that are with all different types of publishers. My observation is that most small presses cannot do for you anything like what you can do for yourself, and at the same time they are hobbled by all the disadvantages that the New York publishers have, with none of the advantages. It's the worst of all possible combinations. That's why I pretty definitively say don't do that.

***If you're self-publishing you control price, you control cover, you control content.***

You don't have an editor telling you to put more sex in, or less sex, or a dog that speaks German. You don't have to have that. I was told what brand of automobile I had to have my characters drive. You have all the control.

***For a lot of people that's dangerous, because they're nervous that they will fail and the failure will be them, and they're right.***

There's a risk that you take. At the same time you're in control, and if you're the kind of person who has the right mindset where there are no failures, there are only learning experiences, then indie is for you. With New York publishing, you don't have any of that. You don't control the cover, you don't control the marketing. You could try to market, but they will hobble you with price and distribution. Just having your blurb be something that sells the book - you don't have control over that. It's really tough. They hobble you in a lot of ways, because they think they know, and they want you to just step aside and let them take the reins. If you're lucky and your book happens to hit the market you will have some success there, and if you do then New York publishing can actually do some things for you. They can get you into bookstores. If they buy into your success, they can build on that.

***They are really good at making stars shine brighter. They're not going to make you a star to begin with.***

You are going to make you a star and if you are star material — you have a book that could zoom — you're just as likely to do better with self-publishing, and then go traditional and have them help you shine brighter. For almost everyone I recommend self-publishing, and there are only a very few exceptions to that.

It's not as if you don't *need* to take it (a traditional publishing deal) as you don't *want* to take it. It will limit you and it will make you a lot less money. The other part that they offer is glory. That is the coin of the realm for traditional publishing. If you want that glory, and that is all that it will do for, if you have no other reason, if you don't want to make a living at it, you don't want to have a huge catalogue, if none of that is important to you, if the only thing that's important to you is that one book gets sold traditionally, then go directly there. For most people that's not what they're about. They want to make a living at it, they want to write a bunch of books.

***You get very spoiled as an indie. You get to call all the shots, you get to it exactly the way you want it, and if you're successful you're 'Hey, I'm successful!' Why wouldn't I keep doing what I do well?***

## In your Boot Camp book you start off by saying 'Have a five year plan'. How did yours work out?

I started out wanting to break even on my first book. I committed to writing a trilogy, which is what I recommend to everyone to do, and I was just going to see if I could break even, hopefully, in the first six months. It was a year-long plan. Once you break even you've demonstrated you have a business. If you can cover your costs you've got a minimally viable business. And now how do you grow that to make whatever level of income you need for whatever your needs are? Some people don't need to make money. Some people are retired, they've got a pension, they're writing for fun. If it made latte money they're fine with that. Some people desperately need something to pay for the mortgage, and they really need the cash.

***If you can demonstrate that you can create a product that will sell and cover its own costs within a reasonable amount of time then this is a viable business for you.***

Then, if you have the right mindset, you can grow it to become something that will be what you want it to be. I hit that two months out of the gate. Which surprised me! My next goal was to replace that engineering salary, because that was supposed to pay for kids' college education, I had three of them and they were smart. I thought if I can hit that in five years, that's when my youngest is going to be in school, and I really need to have a job at that point. I hit that in the first year. I've pretty much maintained that or more ever since. That was before I started doing my pen name, which is a whole other story. I've hit the goals, but you need to have actionable things that you can do to reach that goal. You can do the actions and maybe you'll hit the goal and maybe you won't, and you can course-correct along the way. That's what it is with book publishing; you can set whatever goals you want, they're the lighthouse that you're looking towards, but you can't look at the lighthouse all the time.

***You've got to pay attention to the waves and you've got to swim so you don't drown, that is what every day in indie publishing is like... not drowning! Now that I think about it, that's a terrible analogy, but accurate!***

## What other goals do you see indie authors trying to achieve?

A lot of it is what money means. Money is so valued by our society, and we forget that it translates into a thing. Maybe it's freedom to write whatever you want? Or whatever you want with your time? For me, funding my kids going to college is starting to happen — my first one is going this Fall — which is freaking me out, and it's very important to me that all of my kids had the ability to go to whatever college they wanted no matter how expensive it was. It's a very personal goal to me, that

happens to come with a price tag. A lot of people have that, but they don't always put it that way in their mind.

***I always say find what your mountain is. Don't climb a mountain that, when you get to the top, it's not what you actually wanted.***

You sold that million books, but what does that actually mean to you? Who cares? It's cool and really fun to brag about, but when you're home at night with your husband on the couch... what does that actually mean to you? Because that's where the satisfaction comes. I know way too many authors where I've seen them go through the cycle again and again where they get popular, they sell a bunch of books, and then they're like... where's the meaning? What am I actually doing with my life here? I'm spending all my time selling books, or writing books, and I don't have time to play with my kids.

***You want to make sure you can picture the perfect life that you would like to have and work towards that. What I want next is much more lifestyle focused. I want to do fun things before I die! That determines how much I can write and how much I can publish.***

Your Facebook Group is called For Love Or Money,  
and you have to answer a question when you join...  
Tell us about the kinds of answers you've had.

It's a thing Facebook enacted where you can actually ask people to answer a question, and so I asked them what's one of your goals in publishing, and I get everything from 'I want to get an

agent,' — and I'm like, 'Not the right group... y'all can come in, but you're not gonna find an agent here.'

Just today I approved a couple. One was talking about fear. She says she's written a book, and she's written all her life, and I've finally finished a novel, but I am so afraid, I'm locked up. It's like a confessional, this little box. Everybody has some element of that, and if you don't it's because you're not reaching hard enough into things that are uncomfortable for you, which you need to do as a writer and as a businessperson.

***You need to takes risks with your craft, and with your business in order to be successful. Everyone has to wrestle that fear bear and get a hold of how to manage that in order to move on. It's fun to read those every day and get a pulse of what people are thinking.***

## Have you got a sense of how many books you need to sell to meet an average income?

It's highly variable. The way I would approach it would be, just assume you can get on average two bucks a book, now tell me how much money you need to make. Because everyone has something different. I know people who are in North Dakota who can get by on so little money, they live very frugally, which is brilliant. You're an author; you don't have to *be* anywhere. So why not be where it's cheap to live? Figure out what it is you need, and if you don't really know, just look at whatever the average income is in your area. That's a benchmark, if nothing else, and when I say I make a living, people ask what that means... Average income in my state, I make more than that. That's my benchmark to give people an idea. But if it's forty thousand dollars a year, which is the average income for the US, which isn't really a lot of money, that's roughly twenty-thousand books, which sounds like a lot of books, and it is a lot of books... if you only have one.

***The key is to have more than one book. The people who want to earn a living out of the gate with one book are not being realistic.***

That could happen, it has happened, I've seen it happen, I've seen people hit New York Times bestseller lists with their first book... that's not going to happen to you. That's one person, and I know five thousand authors. You need to break even with your first book in six months and go, 'Yeah, I'm doing good,' and build from there. It's the people who have the outsized and unrealistic expectations that I see go into a dark depression for about six to nine months, come back about a year after that, because they've just walked away completely, and they're like, 'Okay, I'm finally ready to try again.' Because it's devastating. And I get a lot of *try-againers* coming to the group, and they private message me, 'Sure, I've been despondent and here's my whole sad story!'

And I'm, like, breathe, we're going to help you here and we're going to get you back on track, and here's how we're going to do it. I can't do that for everyone, because I only have so many hours and I have to write my own books. I do it every once in a while and it's very gratifying to be able to help people get re-launched again.

## You've not had great experiences with Facebook ads.

### Can you talk about that?

Every piece of advice that I give in the books, in the group, everything has to be caveated, 'This is aimed at the average writer.' This is what will work for the average writer. If it doesn't work for pretty much every body, I'm not going to recommend it, and if you go and survey how many people who have run Facebook ads and how many people who have been successful in running Facebook

ads, especially the people who have been successful to the level that Mark Dawson has, then the numbers are vanishingly small.

***The normal world looks at advertising being a cost, not a revenue generator, but ultimately in the greater scheme you want it to be a revenue generator.***

I back way off on the Facebook ads, because they're a very expensive form of advertising, and they're very hard to do well, and I don't even do them very well. I don't use them personally that much. I do on occasion and under certain circumstances, but it's not my style to invest a ton of money in that kind of advertising. Same with Amazon Marketing Services ads, same with Bookbub ads, I've tried them all, I've experimented with them all, because I have that engineering brain. I can't help myself from experimenting with them. They're all in that high-risk, high-cost category. Lower-risk, lower-cost methods of advertising are definitely where people should start. Then they can expand to the more higher-risk things. That's the way that I recommend.

## What currently works for you?

Every should be doing newsletter advertising like Bookbub, Book Barbarian, there's a whole bunch of newsletter services where they collect subscribers, and then they email them deals every day. You purchase an ad to be one of the deals offered for the day and it's great in a number of ways. They segment out by genre, so you're at least getting in the ballpark of your genre. Second of all, people self-select. They're only going to click on your book if they like your book and they do it in sufficient numbers that it actually generates some good 'also-boughts' on Amazon, it gives you the right kind of readers, it gives you new readers.

***They're not the readers who are already in your eco-system, these are new fish coming into your pond, and that's what you need a constant inflow of.***



My pen name, who writes romance, she buys all the ads she can every month. She has a lot of books and a lot of sales and she buys as much as she can, because every month that she does that she magnifies her money. I can't pin the return on investment down to each individual ad anymore, because it's not really the right approach. I have a budget for advertising, when I spend my budget my income goes up. When I don't spend my advertising budget, my income goes down. And there are months where I don't spend my budget because I'm too busy writing books. This is part of why I have an assistant now, to help me manage all of that and keep it on the rails. I recommend starting there, and if you go to the group, we have a list of the good ads that you can buy like that. And if you're unsure for your genre what's the best place, you can post in the group and people will answer it.

***They're fantastic that way, it's a very interactive group. People are always on there answering questions, it's wonderful.***

## Are newsletters like Bookbub getting more difficult to get into?

Bookbub is the gold standard. They have millions of subscribers. They're huge. Everybody blanches at the cost, because it's hundred of dollars to buy an ad with them, but I have never — okay, I won't say never — very rarely does Bookbub not pay itself back in twenty-four hours. They price it that way. They are statistic monsters. They have all the data, they know exactly what your book is going to make. They don't choose you unless you're going to pay back, and they calculate the rates right at that line. Take a Bookbub ad any time you can. They're currently biased against anyone in Kindle Unlimited — so, if you're in KU, it's not you, it's them. All the other ads come and go, they grow and decay, and they'll raise their prices and sometimes they'll overshoot.

Everything's dynamic, everything's changing. I've seen ads that worked great six months ago, and not work any more — for me — but they might work for somebody else because they'll be fresh in the pond.

***You just have to keep experimenting. Constantly. All the time. Forever. Pretty much. If you don't like that, this might not be the gig for you.***

Go for the dependable job with the regular paycheck, and that's totally fine. That's not being a failure as a writer, that's just saying 'That business over there is nuts, I am not doing that, my life is so much better when I can just have my normal job and write my stories at the weekend and have my thousand fans or whatever...' That's the mountain.

***Know which mountain you want to climb. And you may not know until you try and climb the other one.***

There's one thing that I love about the group, and it's a baseline, and it's that we respect everybody. If you're a writer, published, unpublished, bestseller, no-seller, part-time, full-time it doesn't matter. If you are on that journey, you are part of our tribe. And we are going to respect whether you do it one hundred percent for love, or if you're out there chasing the money, because you need the money, whatever your reasons, we'll hundred percent support that too. That's my rule. If you're going to come to the group, you've got to be on board with that.

## Is your pen name, your anonymous other self, like a control group in an experiment?

That's a fantastic way of thinking of it, but no, she's more like a petri dish. She incubates all these weird things, 'Ooh, let's try that with Pen Name, because there are no consequences.' If it works, then we port it over to SKQ. I just recently started going the other way, too, where SKQ is currently experimenting with going wide after having been in Kindle Unlimited for a long time, and I'm taking the results from that and applying it back to Pen Name. It really does cross-pollinate a lot, and it gives me a lot of perspective writing in two totally different genres, because the rules are very different in many ways, about how you sell books, and what is required to sell books. It's a huge education.

## We've got five months to go, what advice would you give us?

I would think about your first year, I would think way beyond that first book, because you're not launching a book, you're launching a career... hopefully. Figure out your mountain: what are you in this for? I get the sense that you're very engaged in the community, you like talking to people because you're doing a podcast, you enjoy doing things that are more than just writing the book. You want to preserve that as you go beyond... or not. Think about that. Think about what if the thing's a success; are you doing a trilogy? Which is what I recommend, so you can capture some immediate momentum. There's a lot of people who come out of the gate and have great success

and then they're like... Where's book two? And there's no book two, and there's no book two for another year, and you lose a lot in that time.

**Do what's right for your career and your audience will understand.**

Figure out what that arc looks like. In a success scenario and in a not-so-success scenario, where you don't hit your benchmarks and things fizzle and you've got to re-tool. You've got a range of possible outcomes and then you've quantified it, and then you can go in full-steam.

***I am constantly helping people launch and re-launch, and one reason I do that is to constantly have a finger on the pulse of what actually works for new people. So, I can have some confidence that the advice I'm giving out to people is not totally sending them down the garden path.***

Whenever you start a new series you are basically starting over. People want to think that it will just be a monotonically increasing success ladder that they're climbing and it is so not like that. You'll do that for your first series. It really is very cyclical, and whenever you're starting with a new series you're starting over with a fresh chance, but you're also having to start over from scratch. Porting fans from one series to another is not easy, unless you're writing exactly in the same genre, with exactly the same kind of stories — which my Pen Name does and she *still* has a hard time.

***Readers are very fussy, sometimes you hook them and sometimes you don't, but the one thing to think about is some kind of teaser piece that you can write.***

Some kind of compelling backstory for your main character that is some trauma in his past that now informs the midpoint of the first book, and it intrigues people with a secret that everyone will like to know like crazy, and you're so not telling them! And it's not vital to the story. Now you have a

hook. When you write that story, it needs to be a complete story unto itself; it has a beginning, a middle and an end. Because what you're doing is you're using it as your showpiece. It's you showing your chops. Can I write you a story that you're just going to dig, and it's going to finish well, and it's going to give that 'Hmm, yes!' feeling, and at the same time I'm totally intrigued by this whole world that you've created, or these characters that you've created are so fascinating, witty and fun, I've got to go and read that novel. You've got to go in both directions; you've got this piece that you're going to send out on Instafreebie, you're going to give it away free, you're going to use it anywhere and everywhere, and you're going to use it for your newsletter sign-up, so people who read your first novel when it comes out are going to subscribe to get that baby, and they'll be there when your second book launches, because they'll be on your subscriber list. That's the key that I see as being really helpful.

***And you can do that now. You can start today. Write that story, get it out there, have it be building a list for you before you ever launch your first book.***

# Episode 37 - Susan Kaye Quinn

## Part Two: Go For Launch

*In the second part of our interview with Susan Kaye Quinn, we talk about how to launch your book, pre-orders, fan-service, promoting your books, the dark art of blurbs, the power of tropes and mythology.*

### What's your advice for launching a book?

I don't recommend pre-orders, first of all. It drains away your ranking on launch day, especially when it's your first book. You want everything to push on the first week. I have a model for bookselling — this is what works — and then then I get more information in and I tweak the model, so I'm constantly tweaking the model, but the current model for new authors, launching their first book, my model is that you want to leverage that first thirty days to let Amazon know that you are just frickin' awesome. You can just debut and sell a crap-ton of books all at once, and you're amazing, and they should totally sell your books for you. It's all about convincing the Amazonian gods up there to boost your book for you. I recommend starting in Kindle Unlimited, because the Amazon gods like that. I recommend debuting strong in the first week, because the Amazon gods like that as well. If you are successful you will get on the hot new releases list, which means for that first thirty days you have automatic visibility, and that visibility is everything.

***Push it in that first week, get all your subscribers ready to go that first week.***

Actually, release your book a week ahead, but don't tell anybody and buy ads. A week's notice is enough to buy a lot of ads. Launch it at a discount. Get it going, and then you can get on that hot

new releases list, you'll have that visibility. If you actually have some momentum there with your sales, you may just keep going.

I would say one in a hundred people actually do that, and I've seen it happen with Annie Bellet. She is an amazing writer, wrote all these short stories, was very traditional for a long time, trying to grab that golden ring, finally decided to write a new series, and she was the one in the one hundred. She launched that thing and my God if it didn't just take off. She sort-of inadvertently did all the right things. Although, not too much inadvertently, I think a good 75% of that, she knew *exactly* what she was doing. She wrote an amazing book, she wrote it in a hot genre, she's a huge fan of the genre. This is another secret; if you're a huge fan of the genre, you don't even have to write well. If you just pack it with all the tropes, people will be 'Oh, this is so great!'

***Fans are actually the best writers. If they knew how to write we'd all be out of business.***

Annie, on the other hand, is a fantastic writer, too. She's giving them all their tropes, *and* she's a fantastic writer. That book just took off, and has been selling strong ever since, and she has made a whole career out of that series. She's still writing in it two years later. So that's my strategy to get started.

## How do you long pro-actively promote a book for?

Forever. Seriously. I'm actively buying ads for books I wrote five years ago. You have to. There's an infinite sea of readers out there and if you don't keep fishing, guess what, you're not going to have new fish. It doesn't end. I was talking to a friend of mine who is unpublished, and she just wants to stamp that card and say, 'I am published,' because she's been working at it so long, and I totally get that you want to hit that milestone. The problem with that is this idea that everything will be better. And it's just not.

Everything is so much harder once you're published, because now you have to bifurcate yourself; here's the publishing arm and here's the writing arm, and somehow the writer arm still has to have time to produce more content to feed the machine. And this marketing one has to keep going, too, because if you're not promoting all the time, your life is more difficult.

***Give yourself the gift of having time to write. Even write two or three books. Have it in the can to go, so that you're not totally insane for that first ninety days to six months.***

Have a plan, take the data, see how you're doing, then decide do I even want to do this? I know so many people who launch that first book, and even if they do it well they don't get around to the second book for so long and everything dies, and then they're depressed, and it's a horrible cycle. The biggest hammer you can hit is publishing a book, so if you can go one-two-three with your books in three months, or six months, now you've got not only the momentum of the first week, you've got the momentum of the first months. Amazon's like 'Woah, you're the real deal, you're here to stay, you're actually doing more!' You actually have a chance to grow it, plus you buy yourself the sanity to decide if that's something you can actually keep doing.

You don't have to keep going like that forever. My pen name does, my pen name is kinda crazy. She publishes every month. She's not going to do that forever, but she's going to do that for a couple of years, which is also crazy.

You don't have to do it forever. You can have the first three, and then the fourth one can be months later. Not years. Years is too long. And now you've got breathing room, because you've already got momentum from the first three.



## How do you write your blurbs and how much time do you spend on them?

I spend one hour on average. That's because I've written a million of them. One thing to really know about blurbs is it's very genre-dependent. This is not something I knew right away. It's like telling the first fifty percent of your book to whatever point you want to leave people at with the 'Oh no, what are they gonna do?' You have the introduction, 'In a world where this and that happens, you've got Joe and he's really troubled by his past, then he meets this girl and she's amazing but she's a leopard, and they have problems because of leopard catchers and what are they gonna do? Because leopard people can't marry regular people and, besides, they're gonna kill her!' I'd wanna read that, right?

***A blurb is flash fiction, only you don't end it.***

You leave it with the open, where you reveal something, but you don't close it, so people are like, 'What's gonna happen next?' or you leave them with a choice where he's got to choose a or b. And it can't be, 'Well, obviously he's going to pick a,' it has to be, 'Wow, he's really screwed, I've got to read that book.'

How you write that in an actual craft sense varies by genre, and I didn't get this until I started writing in my pen name. The first few books for pen name I wrote science fiction blurbs for her. She's romance!

***Go to the top twenty books in your genre and see how they write their blurbs.***

When I say genre I mean actual category listings on Amazon. You'll have some consistency there in the way people write their blurbs. And they change over time, that's the other thing, so check in on that when you're getting close to publishing and see how things have shifted. For romance, there's a lot of 'he said/she said' blurbs: 'Caden is a man who was an oil rigger until he lost his mother and then he's been despondent ever since... and the woman is a paediatric nurse who really loves kids, but she can't have any of her own until she meets this guy...'

***You set up this dynamic that's telling the story in opposing voices, which is what your story is.***

Even if your story is entirely in first person-present tense, you're going to write that blurb as the two people, because it's the story of the relationship. Completely different from my dystopian science fiction, where the very first thing is; 'This is a world where everyone reads minds, except for one girl, and she controls them instead.' We don't know who the girl is, we don't know what her problems are, but we enter with the world, we start with world building because science fiction is all about awe, it's all about world. So you intrigue the mind first, because that's what people are in it for, then you start talking about character.

You have to figure out what your real story is, and the number one thing that people say to me — when I say pick your category, target your cover to your category, target your blurb to your category — the number one thing that people say to me is, 'But, see, I'm an exception to this, because my book is actually a thriller-zombie-romance, and no one's ever written this before, and so there are no examples, and it crosses many genres.'

***I don't care. Pick one and market to that.***

More importantly Amazon is doing the work for you. It is pre-sorting, out of the two million books that are on Amazon, it's going to tell you the ones that do best. These ones do best, here they are,

the bestsellers list. And here you have an automatic sampling of what resonates with your audience. Read ten of the blurbs in your category and see if that is what your book is like. For example, if you've got a bullseye for science fiction here, and a bullseye for romance here, and you're wide of the mark on either one of those, you're not necessarily going to sell. It's hitting the bullseye that matters for selling. My other book [For Love Or Money](#) talks about this. Make sure you're in the right category, it makes a difference.

## On the power of tropes:

What really matters is how you hit the tropes. We had a whole thread about this on the For Love Or Money group for a while, about how the fetish of uniqueness. It may seem old to you, but it's not old to the reader, and the reader wants more of that. And they want more of that same thing, but with a fresh twist. You really have to get over the whole thing of it's not unique enough.

The For Love Or Money book really talks about that dichotomy of writing *in* genre, and writing *out of* genre for love. I'm not trying to hit the market, I'm not trying to target the tropes, I'm writing that weird mermaid sea-tentacle romance because it's just fascinates the hell out of me. That's totally okay, and you may or may not sell, but it is a fulfilment of the human spirit to write what calls to you, so for God's sake please do that, please! The world needs more of that. Even if the entire world is just what's between your ears, you need to do that.

***Part of your purpose for being here is to write the things that are important to you.***

At the same time, you may choose to do the 'For money' books as well, and that's really okay. You gotta pay the bills, everybody's got to eat. They don't have to be the same book. I'm the queen of split personality. I have these books that are total mercenary books, and total 'For Love' books. I am writing about future boys who are in love with robots... like that's gonna sell? No. Oh, and let's put religion in there, right? No. Actually, it *kinda* sells, but it's the book of my heart, and I have to

write that story, and I'm obsessed with that story. But, if I actually wanted to make money, I wouldn't write that book. It screws every trope, so badly.

***Find out where your box boundaries are.***

I find out what my tropes are and I make my box. These are the lines out of which I may not stray. That's what the market wants. Within that box, I can do anything I want. I can play hard, I can bring in imports from fairy tales, from shifter romance, and I'm gonna mix it all up, because as long as I stay in that box... I don't have to do the dumb things that are in the box, I just have to not go over the boundaries. Be very careful about being afraid of tropes. Tropes are just a story. A story that everybody's loved for a long time, that's all it is, and they probably still love it.

***If somebody wrote Romeo and Juliet today, with a fresh twist, it would sell like hot cakes, and it does. It has! How many times has Romeo and Juliet been rewritten and called West Side Story or whatever the next reincarnation of it is?***

There is a fantastic book I would recommend called [The Storytelling Animal](#), it talks about why story works for us. What goes on in our brain, neurochemically, and what is the purpose of story in our consciousness, in our dreams, in our everyday life. It's fascinating, and one of the things they talk about is how myths, legends, fairytales, are stories that have evolved over time as the collective wisdom of humanity has been told and re-told and distilled and mangled, but passed on, which should tell you something.

***The stuff that endures, does so for a reason, and it touches something inside us.***

But it has to be updated, because have iPads and Reddit and my life is different now than when we had some weird minotaur thing doing I don't know what, or some god came down as a bull and

impregnated some woman. We have to reinterpret and update stuff, but you're tapping into what Chris Vogler said was the best of humanity, the divine. It's Prometheus bringing down the fire. Tropes are a version of mythology. They're the thing that collectively we've decided means something. It's up to you to take it and make it into something really relevant to your readers today. Really respect the hell out of your reader. A lot of people who write romance, or think that they want to write romance, don't really respect the romance reader. I respect the hell out of that person, because they are the romantics. They're searching for one of the best things that we do, which is love each other. And they love it so much, they want it again and again and again, and they want to be re-affirmed that you can be strong and still be in love, that you can heal, all these different tropes that romance novels have are great stories of humanity. I love people who love those books. I was that way before I started writing them, but I'm even more so now, because I get to interact with them, I get to hear what they like and don't like about the stories and what they do for those people.

***The fluffiest novel that you write, no matter what it is, you're shining a light into some dark spaces that people have in their lives, you're bringing something to them. When you get published, you'll get to see that for yourself.***

# Episode 38 - Erica James From The Heart

*We got emotional over tea and cake with Erica James. Erica is a bestselling author who has sold over 5 million copies of over twenty books, and she never fails to break readers' hearts. We tried to discover how she does it...*

How do you elicit an emotional reaction from a reader?

I do kill people off in my books quite a bit. Even characters that you're not expecting to die. I think that's been done quite well in a big series on the telly if I'm not mistaken? I haven't been afraid to bump people off. Certainly, in my last book *Song Of The Skylark*, even I sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. I didn't expect to feel that way.

Some authors say that unless they cry, they can't expect their readers to cry. Do you think that's true?

Oh, definitely. I've always said that I write from the heart, and I know that sounds a bit cheesy, but it's true. If you're only writing from your head, you're not going to get that emotional depth. Readers have said to me that they think that I empathise with the characters that I create, and I think that's true, and maybe that's at the heart of what I do?

***The heart has to be in the story, the characters, and the setting. As the writer you've got to love everything that you're doing, even the bad characters.***

Jimmy McGovern says his first draft comes from the head, and his second draft from the heart. Does that ring true?

That's a good way of putting it. I think it's a bit of both for me. When I'm doing the first draft I'm literally just throwing the story down. It doesn't matter how many mistakes are in there, or how much I get wrong, or how many blanks I leave. There's still the emotional content there as well. Although, with *Song Of The Skylark* I didn't know how to end that one. I knew it had to have a sad-ish ending, and maybe it was because I was frightened to do that in this instance?

***I wrote the first draft and left the ending. For the first time ever, I didn't end it, because I didn't know how to.***

Then I went all the way back to chapter one to do the final draft and I waited and waited for inspiration to hit me, and I was very, very near the end when it came to me.

Was it just too difficult emotionally?

I knew what had to happen. I didn't know how to do it properly. Recently I was in Norway doing an interview for the same book and the interviewer was asking some really perceptive comments

about this character, Mrs. Dallimoor, who I absolutely loved, and this interviewer made me cry! He kept probing. Even afterwards I was still upset.

Was there a moment where you realised you could do this, or does it come naturally?

I think it comes naturally to me. Just empathising; putting myself in the shoes of the character. Also, I do cry quite easily over really silly things. I think I'm able to tap into emotions that I have. Maybe I didn't realise I had them? An author once said to me that she could only write about happy things, because she didn't want to put herself in a sad place. I think I naturally have a very big sad part to my character. I think I've experienced a number of very sad things in my life, one way or another. It's being able to empathise, getting that emotion down on the page. Maybe some authors are better at it than others? In contrast, my books are not full of sex. I would much rather write about the emotional side of a relationship rather than the graphic side.

Your bio mentions how you used to embarrass your sons by talking to strangers in the street. You like to hear people's stories. Does that inform you as a writer?

Yes, always. I've just been on holiday, constantly on the lookout for someone with a good story to write about. To say I'm a people person, does that sound a bit cheesy? I spend a lot of time on my



own writing. It's a solitary experience and I'm a very self-contained person, so I'm never lonely when I'm writing. But you can't write in a vacuum, you have to come out and meet people. And being around people you just hear the most extraordinary things. A reader emailed me just this week with a mini life story. I wasn't sure if it was something I would want to write about myself, but I'm always grateful when people want to share something with me.

***You never know when it's going to be useful and I am like the proverbial magpie: always on the lookout for something bright and shiny, and with tears attached to it.***

I'm very judgemental. Instantly judgemental! I can tell whether something's worth listening to or not, or whether I just glaze over. It's channeling that emotion that you pick up from someone else. You've got to remember that ninety percent of what any author writes is from their imagination. I'm trying to think if I've ever taken, wholesale, someone else's emotional situation. I don't think I have. That might feel a bit weird.

## What sort of person catches your eye?

You never know when that golden nugget is going to land in your lap, so you scoop it all up. Mostly it's been subsidiary characters that I have gathered up. In one of my earlier books, *The Holiday*, I have a couple called Dolly Babe and Silent Bob and they were based on two characters who I practically stalked in the hotel where I was staying, because I was so fascinated by them. I couldn't stop watching them. Silent Bob lay on a sun lounger all day with his laptop and a pipe in his mouth and a combover and his wife — I presume she was his wife — was rake-thin and never without a glass in her hand and wore this white swimsuit that had never been near any water. I had no idea what they were really like, but I decided what they were like and I used them in my book.

I always travel alone, so that's very easy to eavesdrop on other people's conversations.

*I love the bickering that goes on amongst couples. You start filling in the blanks and you wonder what's the glue that keeps them together.*

If a scene isn't working emotionally, what do you do to fix that?

I don't think I've had that problem! Ah, little miss smug. It just comes from the heart. It's either there or it isn't. I'm able to bring something to it. It's something that's instinctive, it's like asking me how do I breathe? I just do.

You've just delivered your new novel. What draft were you on before you decided it was ready for delivery?

I call it my final draft. It's the second draft. I used to do three drafts, but now I've got it down to just the two.

*The first draft is so rough. I would be so embarrassed if anyone saw it. No one would ever think that was the work of a proper writer.*

Then, in what I see as the final draft, I'm fleshing the characters out, I'm polishing, just trying to get it as right as I possibly can. My editor has read it, and my agent, so now we've gone through that process, (editor) Harriet and I have been discussing the various points that she thinks I need to maybe add some more emotion to, or maybe even take some out. This is my twenty-first book, so I've been through this process enough times to be used to it. I will now go home and spend the

next few weeks doing some rewrites, some of which will be very easy to do, some of which I will need to apply myself to and think how am I going to do that. Then it will go back to Harriet, and then it will go to the copy editor, and then I will look at it again, and then the final typesetters' manuscript.

***I treat each one as an opportunity to get it absolutely right. I have to say, by the end of that process I never want to see that book ever again for the rest of my life.***

## How long are you working on that?

This one has taken just over a year. I had a false start, which is a bit scary. I had written eleven chapters and just knew it wasn't working. I was waking up each morning without a spring in my step. Just that nudge of fear that something wasn't working. So I hit the delete button.

## How do you know when it's wrong?

It was an emotional response to it. I wasn't feeling the love for the characters. I didn't care about them. That told me all I needed to know.

***You have to care about the characters on the page, they have to seem real, you have to care about what's going to happen to them today, tomorrow, in a week's time.***

Their story has to matter to you. And those eleven chapters contained some characters that I didn't care about. It was quite scary, and I hit the delete button and then told my editor. That meant it was time out of my work schedule. I've lost all that time and basically have to go back to the drawing board and start again.

## Is there any remnant of that book in your new book?

There was just one character that I kept. But she turned out a little differently to how I thought she might be. I've had (false starts), but not on that scale. My book *A Sense Of Belonging* I had written the first two chapters, then woke up the next morning and thought no, no, no, no, no. Who's this character? Do I need this character? No, I don't. So out the window she went. Ruthless. You have to be. You can't be precious about it. When you start out, you think every word that you write is wonderful and then you soon realise... actually, no.

## Of all the emotions you write about, is there one that touches readers most?

When I kill a character. Because I've made them care about that character, and then I've done the unspeakable thing. Sometimes it's hard for me to let go. As a writer, you mustn't be afraid to part with someone that you care about. Often I don't realise myself that I'm going to kill these characters off. It comes as much of a surprise to me as it will to the reader. The way I write, I make it up as I go along.

***I don't have a synopsis, I don't have a roadmap to follow. I set all the characters up, set the story rolling, and then this voice in my head says, 'Kill them!'***

We reach an age when we lose people and we know that it hurts to lose someone, whether it's your parents or a friend, and once you've experienced that loss, or maybe it's just a matter of

having someone in your life that it would break your heart to lose them? You can relate to the emotions that the author is putting across.

## Have you ever been asked to bring someone back from the dead in your books?

My agent said of *Song Of The Skylark*, 'Ooh, there's a high death rate in this book isn't there?' I said, it's the second world war. What do you expect? Vulnerability is quite a key element. I didn't realise that I did this, but after I'd written however many books I suddenly realised that I definitely had themes that I followed, and one was vulnerability. Having this very strong character, but then bringing them low.

## Do you ever worry about repeating the same themes and ideas?

The fear of repeating oneself, yes, I live with that fear constantly. Various things crop up in my books again and again. Water, for instance. I had no idea I was doing this until maybe I'd written ten books. The sea will be there, or a lake, or a mere, or a pond, but one way or another water is there. I can only assume it's because I grew up by the sea. I clearly have an affinity with water and it insinuates its way into my books. The new one has a very large lily pond in it.

Earlier books had the perfect couple who had it all... until... I took their son away, basically. Their two-year-old little boy. And that was a ploy. My agent said at the time, 'Erica, why will the reader like this character, Allie, when she's going to do this terrible thing within the novel?' So I had to find a way to make the reader care about Allie, so by killing her child... I related more to her ex-

husband's emotional vulnerability to that. There's something about a father losing his son. There's just something there, I don't even think I can put it into words. Poor Elliot was absolutely on his knees. He lost his son and then he loses his wife, because their marriage breaks down.

Readers assume that my viewpoint is the same as maybe the good characters, actually my viewpoint might chime more with the baddie! I'm actually getting my own nasty viewpoints across in a very subtle way. No one would ever dream that they could possibly be coming from my head.

You're playing god with every book, really.

***You're creating this perfect world, then throwing this bomb into it and disrupting it, and then the rest of the novel is creating order out of the chaos.***

I'm known for writing uplifting novels. I made the reader smile, maybe laugh a little, cry a little, be angry. Lots of emotions. But by the end of it they're happy to have known those characters. The general feedback I get is that people enjoy spending time with the characters.

# Episode 39 - Karen Ball, Author

## Quest!

*A children's fiction special as we talk to Karen Ball, publishing consultant at Speckled Pen and an expert in intellectual property. Karen has published some of the bestselling children's series of the last twenty years, including Beast Quest, which has sold over 11 million copies worldwide.*

It's a challenge to get some children to read. How does a series like Beast Quest engage with them?

Part of the early thinking around the series was to see if there was a way of engaging with what at the time were called 'Reluctant boy readers', I'm not sure that term is quite current any more. The series uses a high interest level, but a simpler reading level, so that for readers who aren't regularly engaged with reading it doesn't feel like a really intimidating process. There's lots of illustration, a very fast-moving plot, and a formula that really works.

*That repeating formula allows children to feel confident in their reading, and that's a really great and necessary part of growing up and allows children to move on to more challenging books, when they're ready to.*

## Is that repetition part of the strategy for a series?

Definitely. From the concept stage you're thinking about the series frame. A story arc that goes over a number of books and some of those details like a repeatable formula that children will enjoy. Which genre are you engaging with? With *Beast Quest*, part of the reason that they've been able to produce so many books so brilliantly is because of the fantasy genre, which means you can constantly keep reinventing your worlds. And that definitely helped me as an editor working on the series, in that I genuinely never, ever got bored of brainstorming books, because every six books you could start again with a whole new fantasy world and invent a brand new beast. So, yes, it's definitely part of the very early thinking.

## You have multiple writers working on something like *Beast Quest*?

We were publishing up to fifteen titles a year, the practicalities are that no single author can write that number of books without hitting massive burnout and learning to hate what they're working on, so we try to avoid that.

***There are a team of writers who write into the series, once the style is established, and it works really well.***



Sometimes, when readers find out about that, they're really fascinated by the process. You sometimes feel as though you're juggling quite a few balls, but if you've got a good team around you I think that can help maintain the freshness of the concept, because you have different brains and voices coming to it all the time.

## Do you have a series bible? Do the writers have to work within constraints?

Making a comparison with a TV show is a really good one. It is a similar process because of the team of writers. If you think about the team of writers who worked on Friends, for example, there were a whole raft of people. And yes, you develop a series bible, which is really important when you're dealing with this number of books that the colour of the main character's eyes doesn't change in book fifty six. You keep track of what your beasts are etc.

If you were approached as an author you would be invited to write some sample chapters to make sure that your writing style fitted, and also, really importantly, to make sure that you're enjoying the process. Some writers love (creative collaboration), and some writers don't want to engage with that. If we feel that we're all working well together, then you can come on the team.

## Are children's books hard to sell in eBook?

Yeah, very much so. Children's eBooks only make up about 4% of the overall children's book market. It's pretty clear that this isn't a way that children are reading, or parents are reading with children. The physical book is still so enticing. I think that's really important at an age where being able to turn pages and having a book that you can put on your shelf and feel proud of yourself, that's part of it with some of these big series. They love seeing their book shelf filled with these books, and you can't do that with an eBook. I think with children's books there are the issues of what we call the gatekeepers; the people actually buying the books.

***Parents, grandparents, librarian, retailers tend to be very passionate about children's books, so it's not always the child buying the book. If those gatekeepers aren't aware of you as an author that makes it all the more difficult, particularly in the eBook and indie market.***

Librarians, especially in the US, can make or break a book, can't they?

A few years ago I went out to accompany an author on a tour in the States and I was blown away to see the libraries out there. It's just on a totally different scale, and obviously the whole market in the States is on a different scale. They're massive and massively important.

## What about self-publishing children's books in a physical format?

Publishing your own books can work for authors who have a back catalogue and maybe the rights have reverted and they still want to see the book out there. The model that I am fascinated by is Unbound, the type of publishing that they're doing. They're quite clear that the type of author that engages with them needs to have a community around them, and I think that is the challenge for a children's author.

***Unbound is a very different profile of publishing whereby they will support an author to promote a concept for a book that people can then donate an amount of money towards, and if that author manages to raise funds to get the book published within a certain time frame, Unbound will publish the book.***

They've had some great successes. The Good Immigrant is the current example of how Unbound has worked excellently, but it hasn't really worked yet in the children's field, and I am just watching that, fascinated, thinking it's only a matter of time. It just needs to be the right person, the right concept.

## How do you work as a commissioning editor on something like Beast Quest?

On that model of publishing, you would basically steer the publishing. You would help decide what the book's going to be, find the authors and commission them, then work very closely with them. Structurally editing and line editing and getting the manuscript to a point where you feel that you can hand it over to another editor for line editing and copy editing. It's quite big picture thinking, and very creative.

In a way it's the same as it is for any author; you're just walking in the street, you read something, and that sets off a chain of thoughts... I'm developing something at the moment, and it's a funny concept and really mad, but whenever I mention it to people they just grin and their eyes light up, and whenever anybody asks me where the idea came from I genuinely don't know. I can't remember. There was this one kernel of a jumping off point, but how it grew from that to what we now have, which is a full concept document, I find very difficult to explain, so I think even with this way of working there's a deep mystery to it, as there is for any author or publisher. The interesting thing is you have absolutely no idea what's going to succeed and what isn't.

***Part of developing concepts of series is just allowing yourself to play with ideas, and I think part of that failure is a really important part of the process.***

It's okay if you play with an idea and then at the end of maybe months of work you decide it isn't working, and we can't make it work and you have to park this, I really strongly believe that's a big part of what you do, and that's okay.

If an author has an idea, what would you expect to see from them initially? An outline? A finished book?

It can really vary, but I'm happy to look at a paragraph idea and if it feels as if it's got legs I just play with the idea with the editor or author, whoever it is I'm engaging with. I would encourage people to do that rather than slavishly work up a full concept that I then look at and immediately think that it's not going to work.

*I'm really passionate about collaborative creativity, so the more we can work together, I prefer that.*

Which are more popular: formulaic series, or ones with an arc?

Possibly with the older age groups you could have a story arc that stretches across several books. With the younger readers you want a really good sense of resolution within each book. For me, a lot of it depends on the project and the idea.

Is it important to keep the language simplified for children's books?

One of the really great challenges that really makes a writer work their muscle is children's books have to be very plot-driven, because it's very easy for the child to get bored. You can't indulge in existential angst the way you can in some adult books. I think it really hones your skills in terms of plotting. I went to a talk a couple of weeks ago with the author Alex Wheatle who had written several adult novels and I commissioned his first YA novel Liccle Bit, and he was talking about the process of transferring over to write for a young adult audience and he described it as almost like script writing. I was pushing him all the time for plot-plot-plot.

You need a bit of everything. Robin Stevens spoke about how there had been some piece recently where a teacher had told a child that she shouldn't be reading Robin's books because they were too easy, or something. And Robin came back and made this excellent point that the child should be able to read anything, at any point in their life. It was listening to your podcast with Kate Harrison and she was making the same point about adults, that you can read a rom-com, put that down and then go and read some high literary novel. So, I think you need really rich world-building books, like Philip Pullman, and you (also) need your Beast Quests. I don't think with any author you can strip out their voice.

***Any author writes as they write and it's your job as an editor to help them be the best that they can be, and I don't think any part of the conversation is about telling them to write with a different voice.***

## Turning to celebrity authors, what have you learned from the success of children's authors like David Walliams?

I think it says as much about the publisher as it says about the author. HarperCollins did a really fantastic job of positioning him; teaming him up with Quentin Blake as illustrator, and my impression is that there was some really long-term strategic thinking around how they were engaging with David as an author. This wasn't an opportunistic use of his name, it was really, really careful publishing and that has carried through.

## When do celebrity books work and when do they *not* work?

That is the million dollar question. As with all book publishing, the one thing none of us can control is the book buyer. It's always a bit of a calculated risk and sometimes it works, and sometimes it just doesn't. For whatever reason, books just don't connect. When I was still commissioning and publishing books, I would be looking at the overall shape of my list, and I would see it a little bit like spread-betting. I would have a really commercial series, I would have my lovely stand-alone novel from an author where I felt really passionately about that book, I might have a little bit of non-fiction. You have a spread of publishing, and I felt that was part of my responsibility as a publisher to make sure that was happening, because in an ideal world you're seeing black ink rather than red ink on a financial

spreadsheet. It's a glib thing to say, but those big successes would allow me to go into an acquisition meeting with confidence, and say 'Indulge me on this one, please. I really want to publish this book as I really feel passionately about it.'

The risk with a celebrity author is the level of advance in the author, and the advantage of a model like Beast Quest is because your costs are very known. I think one of the really key things is a really strong marketing campaign around books like that.

## Would advice would you give an indie author planning their career?

Get a really good agent. Though I guess if you're an indie author you might not be using an agent. Particularly in the children's field you really do need to research your market. One of the early mistakes people make is they might write a book aimed at eight-year-olds that sixty-thousand words long. That's just not going to work. It's too much. Research your age-range. Work as hard as you can on your plotting.

People can start writing a children's book because they have fond memories of their own childhood, or even not fond memories of their own childhood. Maybe they're still working through the divorce of their parents and they want to get it out by writing a children's book?

***Remember, it's not about you, it's about the child reader. A contemporary child reader. It's not about you when you were growing up in the 1970s.***

A respect for your audience and engaging with your audience is absolutely key. If you feel able to do school visits and library visits, bookshops events, because a child audience is



the most passionate audience. I remember years ago, as an editor, doing a school visit and I walked into that playground and I was mobbed! And I was just an editor. It was huge fun. You should also be prepared for the fact that children will ask you how much you earn, and they expect an answer. Don't underestimate your audience. You cannot pull the wool over a child's eyes. If there's a detail in the book that isn't working they will call you out on it.

***Listen to you editor: if they're telling you something isn't working, listen, because if you don't, you'll be hearing it from children.***

## How does it work with Speckled Pen?

It's a publishing consultancy and I work with publishers and licence owners and agents and authors. My personal approach tends to be quite hands-on. You know the whole 'show-don't-tell' mantra that's hammered into authors? I think that can be as relevant to editors. I don't want to give somebody a reader's report and say go away and solve all of these issues. I tend to bring a lot of my own collaborative approach to engaging with authors. We've had brainstorming, Post-It Note brainstorming at my house, with all these Post-It Notes on the wall, I get quite stuck-in with authors. If they have a very concrete project that they want some help on.

## How dark can you get with children's books?

It depends on the context of the storytelling. If, for example, it was high fantasy you can have sword fights, blood and guts, it's fine because it's not of our world. And with fantasy novels it can help children explore emotions and experiences in a safe way. If it was a domestic drama for an 8-12 age range and there happened to be an adult character who was hitting a child, you have to publish it sensitively: which part of the 8-12 spectrum is it on? It's all in the storytelling. There are details that I wouldn't want to see on the page, but you can certainly imply. There are some great books out there that do that. Keep it consistent, not just for the reader, but for the people trying to sell this book and place it in a bookshop. What type of story is this? The publishers needs to make it clear to the buying public what the content is. Children's publishers are excellent at steering the packaging of books so that hopefully there aren't any nasty surprises.

## At what age can you introduce bad language?

It varies. There's a wonderful children's author called Joanna Nadin who I worked with when I was at Little, Brown and we were working on a book called Joe All Alone and I basically sent her a list of rude words that I wanted her to take out of it. And she put some comments on Twitter about, 'I've never received an email that's just a list of rude words!'

***It's a really difficult one to call and judge because I think as adults you know what does feel inappropriate.***

You can have the odd fruity word in there, because kids are hearing it in the playground all the time. If there's any concern over language there can be a sticker on the book that can highlight the fact that there's strong language in it.

## What can authors writing adult fiction learn from children's writing?

Plotting. Children's fiction has to be so pared-down it can teach you a lot about the discipline of plotting.

There can be word count parameters that will or will not work for certain age ranges. That can be really useful. I'm a firm believer that the tighter the box, the more your creative muscles can work.

## What are those word count limitations?

A Beast Quest is about ten thousand words, and that's for 7-9 age range. For Middle Grade: twenty- to twenty-five thousand words. It can go up to forty-thousand words for older Middle Grade, and then with YA it can be sixty- or seventy-thousand words.

Word counts is one of the things I still struggle with when developing concepts. To be honest, I think if you put six editors around a table, you'd get six slightly different answers. But you know when it's majorly off. You can just tell.

***It all does come back to; the author will tell the story that the author needs to tell. I don't think you can prescribe for that, and I don't think that technology can prescribe for that.***

Books like *The DaVinci Code* by Dan Brown were quite interesting in that maybe it used some of the principles that you might use in, for example, a *Beast Quest*, which has massive cliffhanger chapter endings, shorter sentences, shorter chapter lengths, to just keep that breathless momentum going.

## What have you learned about the important of Intellectual Property (IP) in books?

It's useful in that it allows whoever's generating that IP to own a range of rights that they can then exploit over books, merchandising, film and TV. It allows you to have a bigger picture for the project from the outset, which can be quite interesting. I like the collaborative creativity. I really thrive on that. I find it quite difficult to work alone now. I question whether or not I could be a traditional author now, because I'm so used to collaborative creativity and I really bounce off other people. I'm a huge fan of that way of working.

## What are the qualities you look for in a children's author?

I run the [Bookbound Writers' Retreat](#) with some friends and at the last retreat there were definitely two or three people who I just thought you've got what it takes and we're going to see interesting things from you. It wasn't just writing talent.

***It was also an awareness of what's involved in the journey and they were doing the most that they could to educate themselves.***

They were proactive on social media. They were doing all the things that you need to do in order to help build your career. But, at the same retreat, there was somebody else who was a bit of a timid mouse of a character, and it would have been really easy to overlook her, but she has just had her first book deal for a huge amount of money. You can have all those rules and you can tear up the rule book and throw it out the window. Which is why we remain fascinated by the publishing industry because fundamentally it remains deeply mysterious. It whatever system works for that individual writer. For myself, as with every author, I have manuscripts that have gone into bottom drawers, and the irony is that having worked as an editor in a very structured way, often, with my own writing, I would be that person just sitting down and opening up a Word document and starting to write. I kind of regret that. I do wish I had done more of the planning with my own manuscripts.

## What advice would you give to writers about to work with an editor?

I always used to try and ask an author, how do you like to be edited? Often they wouldn't know how to answer that question, but it felt like an inclusive question to ask. Even if the editor doesn't initiate that question, you might want to just ask what the process is going to be like.

***I would urge you to be as open-minded as possible to suggestions that the editor is making, because she's not doing it for the sake of it, she's doing it for good reasons.***

If there are any edits that make you want to throw your laptop on the floor, please walk away from the laptop before you send an angry email to your editor. It's really, really, really, not a good idea. And it's not cool and you'll feel really embarrassed afterwards. It happens all the time. It's understandable, but that's human nature.

Be clear what it is that you're asking the editor for: are you looking for a structural edit? Line edit? A copy edit? Make sure that everybody understands what the parameters are of the commissioned work.

If you're an indie author and you're paying the editor it can influence the relationship. I would urge people to make it clear that you want honest feedback and be really clear what the parameters of engagement are and you understand them.

# Episode 40 - Laura Barnett's

## Greatest Hits

*Laura Barnett's 2015 debut The Versions Of Us was a smash hit number one bestseller, translated into 23 languages. Now she faces that difficult second album syndrome, but Laura has come up with an ingenious solution and a unique piece of fiction with her new book, Greatest Hits, which has its own soundtrack album courtesy of singer-songwriter Kathryn Williams.*

### What drew you to do a book with a soundtrack?

The idea for making a soundtrack album to a book came to me on the M6, on a long drive back from Scotland, that very glamorous road, we can call it the new Route 66. I was sitting and thinking and looking out at the rain and it just occurred to me that there could be such a thing as a soundtrack album to a book and that this would be a really exciting new way of bringing together two art forms. That probably came out of twelve years that I spent as an arts journalist, covering all sorts of cultural collaborations, what we might call crossover projects. I remember interviewing Ray Davies about working with a choir, or choreographers who had worked with visual artists, and my husband used to be an actor and he would act with Secret Cinema who do theatrical, immersive experiences around films. It felt like there was this ferment of activity between art forms. But literature, which is probably my primary love, alongside music, was still a case apart. And reading is still a

solitary experience, but the new digital formats and audiobooks really give us a chance to take reading to new places and to expand the experience beyond the page. That immediately struck me as an exciting possibility. And it was a few months after that when my agent was just about to send my debut novel, *The Versions Of Us*, out to publishers she said, ‘Are you working on anything else?’ and I was, like, ‘No, this is my life’s work that I’ve poured into it.’ But I sat down and thought about ideas and had this idea of a book about a musician, and the two just seemed to fit together. It was a convergence of ideas.

Did you write the songs with Kathryn, or did you give her the background to the songs?

Kathryn didn’t come into the process until a little bit further down the line. Although I pitched the idea to the publishers from the beginning as having a soundtrack, I didn’t even quite know at that stage when I would want to involve a musician, I didn’t know which musician it would be. I was quite open. I didn’t know at that stage if she would definitely need to be female. That became clearer to me as I wrote. I’m not a writer who tends to plan in meticulous detail.

***I like to take a premise, a concept, a character and then get to know her or him over the course of the novel, as you would a person in real life.***

I don’t like to decide everything about a character in advance, as I like to give them room to surprise me. It felt pretty obvious that I would need to write a draft of the whole novel before approaching musicians, partly because I just wanted to know what was going to



happen and what I was presenting them with. I wrote first drafts for the lyrics for all sixteen as I wrote that first draft of the book, so I wrote what I was thinking of as holding, or embryonic lyrics, for each song. That was partly because I needed to work out how each chapter would then express itself in song.

***I had to live the experiences with Cass, the character, before I could write a song about it.***

I had the whole draft before I approached Kathryn, who I had been a fan of for years, then heard her on the radio on the 6 music Cerys Matthews show talking about her last album Hypoxia, which was inspired by Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar. I thought, wow, this is amazing; here's a musician who's already thinking about how to express music and literature. There's a natural synchronicity here. I fired off an email to her publicist at One Little Indian — from my journalist days I had an email address knocking about — and he came back saying this was something she might be up for. And she was! She rang me the next day and we just spoke for half an hour, and got on really well.

***She said I've no idea how this is going to work, it sounds totally impossible, so let's do it!***

A few weeks later... you know how you decide on something and then life decides to throw... I suppose it either tends to throw a spanner in the works, or helps you? And life did the latter in our case. She was doing a gig — she lives in Newcastle — but she was doing a gig down the road from me in South London, so I went along and she came to stay at my house. We had never met at this point, so she just rocks up at my house after the

gig at quarter to twelve, and I gave her glass of wine and she stayed in our spare room. The next day we sat down, I handed her an A4 page composed on Scrivener — which is what I genuinely write in! — which had the lyrics for a song called Common Ground, which is the first song in the book, and the first song on the album. I said, these are the lyrics I've written, this is what the song's about, my character is this age when she writes it and it's inspired by this, she's listening to this, it's the late '60s, so it's that early singer-songwriter acoustic Nick Drake vibe. She picked up a pencil and said 'How brutal can I be with it?' I said go for it, be absolutely free. So she started moving things around, and started to sing and as far as I was concerned it was as if she was taking dictation from somewhere. The song just emerged, more or less fully-formed.

***It was a very emotional moment, and I started to cry, and then so did she, and there were lots of tears and hugs and we knew then that it was going to be okay.***

Once you heard the songs, did your subsequent drafts change much?

The book was pretty much there by the time I approached Kathryn. I went through lots of drafts as all writers do, refining and improving and getting to know the character better and sorting out plot points and all that sort of stuff. Music-wise, I had been quite careful not to be too specific about how the music sounded, so I could be open then to how the music actually did end up sounding. Once we had the songs written, I did go back in and rewrite some descriptions in order to reflect the songs that we had actually written. Some of that happened really quite late on. The publishing process is a lot longer than the music-

making process. We worked together over the course of about a year to write the songs, but actually recording them and arranging them, which was done by the most amazing man called Romeo Stodart, who a composer and producer from The Magic Numbers, and he's such a knowledgeable and amazing man and he's worked amazing wonders in the studio down in Eastbourne where they have all this analogue equipment, so we could get the right sound for the different decades. Various things happened during that process that then influenced the book. For instance, there's a song called Edge Of The World, which is one of the newer songs that Cass, the character, has written and it's a very key, very emotional song about this big tragedy that strikes her. In the book I had a chapter where this song appears in Cass's mind in the middle of the night and she goes out to her studio in her slippers and nightgown and she takes her Martin guitar down off the wall and strums out this song. one morning I arrived at the studio in Eastbourne and Romeo and Kathryn were looking slightly sheepish and they were like, yeah, we've done a first take of Edge Of The World, and Romeo's ended up playing piano rather than guitar and we just want you to have a listen. And I was a bit, uhm, I'm not sure about that. then they played it to me and it was just the most astonishingly, beautiful rendition. The piano sounded languid, the washing of waves against the beach, which is the big theme of the song. I said, that's the take, and I changed that section of the book so it happens that, instead of taking down the Martin guitar, she sits down at her Steinway and writes the song on piano. So, yeah, there was definitely mutual influence.

One of the book's themes is sacrifice. Is that something you've experienced, or were you tapping into real musicians' lives?

It's always hard to draw the line between reality and truth. There's definitely a lot of my musings in the book, as a woman in her mid-thirties, married for a number of years, trying to figure out if we can fit kids into the equation. My husband used to be an actor, he's also a musician, so we've got two creatives in a partnership, and it's not always easy to see how people living slightly unconventional lives can make room for children, and there is a big part of the book that draws on Cass's experiences of motherhood and her own ambivalence about becoming a mother. There is a lot of my working out about these things, which I didn't even realise would be there, really, until I'd finished it. So that's me being brutally honest, also I did draw on a lot of true stories of women in this era. Everyone from Sandy Denny, Kate Bush, Carly Simon, Carole King, Joni Mitchell all these inspiring women. So many of them had stories of sacrifice, particularly personal sacrifice. There's no escaping the fact that it remains difficult for anyone, but particularly for women to sustain a career at the top her game in the arts, without sacrificing some aspect of her emotional life, whether it's her relationship with a partner, or with friends, or perhaps not becoming a mother at all, or losing touch with family. This is a very common experience for all artists. As a journalist, I was lucky enough to spend twelve years interviewing artists of all stripes, and women of that generation, women who are now in their sixties and seventies, were very candid with me about the choices they had to make. In reading about women like Joni Mitchell or Carole King, all of them had some story of difficulty with

motherhood, whether it was, in Joni Mitchell's case, giving up her child for adoption, or in Carole King's case having to take a step back from music, or even having her daughter perched on the piano while she was trying to write. It was the pram in the hall thing. So all those things came out in the book.

***There's me and there's them and it's hard to know where one ends and the other begins.***

I don't want to speak for Kathryn too much, but we certainly had a lot of conversations. She found some parallels with Cass and her dilemma and some differences. I should say one key decision that Kathryn took very early on in our collaboration was that she would wait to read the whole book until we had all sixteen songs written. This whole process was us feeling our way in the dark, because it had never been done before and we really didn't know how to do it.

***She felt that it was important for her that she was able to live each experience with Cass, consecutively, without the hindsight caused by reading the whole novel.***

If she came in knowing all that would come to pass, she couldn't inhabit the experiences as Cass was living them. We wrote the songs by me giving her this embryonic lyric sheet for each one, and then me telling her about what Cass was listening to, and what the song was inspired by in abstract, and me sending her a couple of paragraphs to illustrate that point. But it wasn't until all sixteen songs were written that Kath read the whole book and then she told me that there were things that struck a chord with her. Kath is a fantastic mother, she's really inspiring to me as someone who's managing to do that with a very

supportive husband and making it work. She's an awful lot younger than Cass Wheeler in the book, and she's also not a confessional songwriter in the way that Cass is. Kath is a writer who invents, and it irritates her — and she thinks it's particularly something that women musicians get asked — when it's assumed that she's lived through every kind of experience that she writes in her songs. Whereas someone like Bob Dylan can write about a character (and that assumption isn't made). Whereas Cass, in the novel... It's weird isn't it? Kath and Cass. In the novel I had to change the name of my protagonist after Kathryn got involved, because in the first drafts Cass Wheeler was called Cass Williams! And that really would have been one step too close, so I had to change it to Wheeler. I can't speak for Kath too much, but she found some resonances and we had a lot of conversations that fed in.

## *The Versions Of Us* was a smash hit. What were the biggest lessons you learned from that?

The biggest lesson I learned writing *Versions* was to choose a subject that really meant something to me as an author, which sounds like a true-ism, but it's actually harder than it sounds. So, although *Versions* was my debut, it wasn't the first novel I'd written. I still have two others in a figurative drawer — they're actually on the hard drive of my computer — that I had sweated blood over the ten years between leaving university and seeing *Versions* get published. They were tough years. I was working full time as a journalist, which isn't the calmest of professions, then I was freelance, then I did this crazy thing of leaving a staff job at the Guardian, which at the time had a no compulsory redundancy clause in the contract, so they couldn't make you redundant, and everyone thought I was

insane, but I left because fiction was what I really wanted to be doing and what really mattered to me. It was hard paying the bills, being a freelancer, all that stuff. In the meantime, writing these novels that I think now, looking back, I was writing for a sort-of imagined reader rather than for myself.

***I was trying to write for the market, which is probably fine if you're writing a thriller or a genre novel — and I'm not saying that no knowledge of the market is important, it is important — but ultimately a reader can smell inauthenticity a mile off.***

The idea for *Versions* came out of a depressed period when I was thirty and felt like life was getting a bit serious and I was asking myself, 'What am I doing? What am I doing wrong? Why are these books not working? Why can't I get published?' The answer came to me that I wasn't dragging these stories up from the depths of my soul and so I asked myself, 'What did I want to write?' and that's when I thought of the idea for Versions, which was the idea of this one couple's story told over three different way across sixty years, another crazy idea that inspired fear and a sense of impossibility and therefore made me more determined to do it. I carried that over into Greatest Hits, the story of a creative woman having lived this long, apparently successful life, with a lot of pain and difficulty behind the scenes, that excited me, as did the possibility of making an album to go with the book.

Leaving your day job: was it a case of realising that you had to do it, or was it a gradual process?

It was a bit of both. I loved my years as a journalist. I've wanted to write novels since the age of five, it's just that when I graduated from university I was twenty-one and I thought what have I got to say to anyone about anything at this age? I need to go out and earn a living and live some life first, really, and find out what the hell this is all about.

***Of course, the longer you live, the less you realise you know about anything, but anyway, there y'go...***

I trained as a journalist and loved it, but kind of knew it was always a means to an end. It's not the easiest day job to combine with something else, because you're working ten or eleven hours a day and it's quite high intensity. It was a combination of being increasingly unhappy in the role I was in, and a senior colleague at the Guardian took me under her wing and said I can see you're not happy, what is it you want? I said, I want to write novels, and she said why are you in a staff job here then? You should really go freelance. I had a mortgage to pay, and she said we'll sort you out with a contract and we'll figure that out. She really helped me make that decision. I was gently pushed, and I'm not sure I would have done it without that and I'm incredibly grateful to her. Unfortunately, she passed away a couple of years ago, she was an amazing woman called Georgina Henry. She was a real mentor at that stage, and without her help and her belief I would have found it really difficult to jump out of the nest.

## How did you handle the success of a bestselling first novel?



You'd have to be some crazy narcissist to assume that any of this is going to happen. The success of it came by degrees. I'm happy this has happened to me in my thirties rather than my twenties, because I can imagine it can be quite easy to get big-headed and to take everything for granted. I'm also lucky to have a very brilliant and very pragmatic straight-talking agent, so things happen by degrees. The agent loved the book, she said I think editors are going to love the book, but obviously we can't be sure they will, assume you'll get ten grand and then we'll see. And then editors did love the book and then we had a seven-way auction, so then you know that more is at stake here, and then you get to meet people, and it grows. These funny people called scouts start getting in touch, who research upcoming novels for TV and film companies, and we started getting people in touch from Hollywood, and then we sold the TV rights before it was published. It happened step-by-step, but even with all of that you can't be sure that people are actually going to buy it and that it's going to translate into readers not only buying it, but loving it. It came by degrees, and I still very much do not take a thing for granted. I've done events with four people in Bradford, then two hundred people in Glasgow, I'm as happy at the event with four people. I'm still just grateful that they're there and they want to talk to me.

## Can you tell us more about the film scouts?

We had a number of film and TV companies interested in optioning the rights for *The Versions Of Us*. Again, that was another set of very surreal meetings sat with people from insert name of film company that I probably shouldn't name, talking about how they wanted to adapt it and I just kept having to pinch myself, because you just don't really believe these things are going to happen. In the end we did sell the rights to a company called Trademark Films and a producer called David Parfitt. An awesome, British, South

London-based company. They made *Parade's End* for the BBC, and *Shakespeare In Love* and all manner of good things. That's still in the offing. It's a slow process, I'm learning.

## Was there a moment where it hit you that the book was doing well?

It's two years now since *The Versions Of Us* came out, and now the new book's out I was comparing my experience of publication then with what's happening now, and I remember that the book sold in America as well. For some reason, the Americans needed me over there in May, around the time that *Versions* was coming out here, I was on an overnight transatlantic flight the night before *Versions* came out, which happened because we had to bring the release date forward by four days, so I hadn't planned it like that. And I'm not the best overnight flyer, so I had a really bad sleep on this really uncomfortable economy class flight. I remember landing in Gatwick, exhausted and bleary-eyed, taking out my phone and checking my Twitter, and there were a hundred Tweets all about happy publication day and it was in *Stylist* magazine and it was in this and that and it was just... I was so tired and excited and euphoric and it just felt really surreal and I was still half-asleep. I think we had builders in our house at the time, so I got home, and it was brick dust everywhere and all this stuff in our front garden and me being like, 'My dream's just come true!' and the builder being like, 'Yeah, can I have a cup of tea?'

## Are you someone who writes every day?

No, I'm not. I write in spurts. There's a kind of rhythm to publication which I'm learning, because this is only my second published book. The promotional cycle is so intense, and it's so difficult to get yourself out of the headspace of one book, and be writing the other, that I tend to dedicate a number of months to just promoting the book, and I did that for the hardback of *Versions* and again for the paperback, and then I'll get back into my writing room and just be very disciplined and get on with writing. At the moment, it's worked out quite well. I'm already researching my third book, but I'm not actually into the writing stage yet, because I don't plan too much, I have to do a lot of research to really immerse myself in the characters' world.

***It's always percolating. There's a lot of writing that happens below the surface, that happens outside the study, and it's taken me a long time to give myself permission for that.***

I do a lot of yoga and go running and those things are really important, because that seems to be when things consolidate. And that fifteen or twenty minutes when you wake up and can't quite get out of bed and you've put your alarm on snooze, that too seems to be when characters form and plots form. If thinking is writing, then I write every day. I always have ideas in the shower. The idea for my third book, which I'm researching now, came in the shower.

You've done lots of research into the music world, are you prepared for the nerds who will start nitpicking?

I am prepared, not least because I am quite nerdy myself and quite obsessive about detail, and I think, having been a journalist, I find it quite difficult to allow myself to make things up. I spend a lot of time researching exactly which model of Fairlight computer would have been used in this particular year. One of the hardest things when writing this book was to silence what I would now characterise as a sort of men's chorus of angry rock critics, who were there in my head telling me that everything I was doing was rubbish and what right did I possibly have to try and do this, and no this isn't the right name for a prog rock band in this year or whatever. I had to silence them. I had to work really hard to do that and it was tough. There were days when the imaginary shouts deafened everything I was doing. I'm happy to say, I've met a few male rock critics so far in the promotional stuff, and they've all loved it, at least they said they did. Hopefully there won't be too much of the green ink brigade.

It sounds like the sort of thing that the likes of Kate Bush and Joni Mitchell went through, too.

Sure, and I think it's there as a female author. We might touch on the fact that *The Versions Of Us*, which is quite a literary, quite challenging, conceptual story was called Chick-Lit by a number of critics. That surprised me, to be honest, it just didn't occur to me that anyone would see it that way, and had I been male, and American, and called Jonathan Franzen, they wouldn't have done. It is frustrating, but I would also say that I've thought a lot about the rock novel before starting *Greatest Hits*, and wondered why the sort of novel that I wanted to read, which was going to be quite an emotional, intense journey through one character's life, a female rock musician, I wondered why that book didn't exist, and it

occurred to me that a lot of the rock novels that haven't been so successful have maybe gone a bit Spinal Tap in getting too obsessed with the pernicky detail.

***And I did do my research, and I did hang it round what I hope is realistic architecture, but ultimately this is a story about a woman, a human being, who happens to have been a musician, that could just as easily have been a carpenter, or any another sort craftsperson, or a bus conductor.***

It's about how you make peace with your mistakes, it's about how you come to terms with things that have gone wrong, over which you have no control, how you forgive yourself for your errors. And, in that way, hopefully it becomes more about her than about which venue she played at in 1974.

I was never in the music journalist fraternity, and I use the word fraternity quite deliberately. There are more and more women now, people like Miranda Sawyer. I was more of a general arts journalist. I encountered an issue that I had also encountered with *Versions Of Us*, which is when you set a realist novel across half of the twentieth century, I like to have real people walk in and out of scenes and it's something that an author called William Boyd does quite a lot, and he must have been just as careful about it as I then had to be, because I had various real musicians saying and doing things which the lawyers here at Orion suggested might be better that they didn't say or do anything. You can inadvertently defame in fiction. You have to be really careful. There was a case with a French author getting sued by Scarlett Johanssen's people for having her for a character. Obviously you just can't go round having people who are still alive doing and saying things, or being at a party where there might be drug taking happening, so I did have to work hard to ensure that anyone who actually spoke or did anything is now dead, because you can't defame a

dead person. You could go through *Greatest Hits* and notice that any real people who say or do anything are now deceased. In the end, it's on this borderline between reality and fiction, so I did invent a number of characters who might slightly resemble others... any resemblance is entirely coincidental! It was about finding out where it was okay to bring real people in and where it was better to stick with fiction.

## Any advice on motivation for when you feel like you're talking into the void and no one is listening? (A listener question from Rhoda Baxter)

I'm in that situation all the time. I would say you have to ask yourself whether you really have to do this. In my other life as a journalist I did a non-fiction book of advice for actors and Matthew Horne, the comic actor, his primary advice to young actors was 'Don't do it.' It's a bit of a cliché, other people have said it too, because that immediately sorts the wheat from the chaff. If you hear that and feel a slight sense of relief, and you just want to go and sit on the sofa and watch Netflix — not that there's anything wrong with doing that, even while you are writing a novel... has been known, it's called research! — if you can be dissuaded, if you can do anything else and be happy, then go and do it, because you'll have a much happier life. But if you're just going to do it anyway, despite not being published for ten years, or twenty years, or thirty years, if you do it because you simply cannot envision a life in which you don't try to make sense of existence on the page, then you just have to keep doing it. Then it doesn't really matter whether people buy it, or listen to it, or read it. Not initially. Ultimately it will be up to you, if you keep writing for fifty years

and can't get published, who knows? You'll decide whether you want to keep doing it or not. It's just whether you *have to* keep going.

***I think if you're a true writer then the answer to 'Don't do it' is 'Well, sod you, I'm going to do it anyway.'***

## How do you compare writing a song to writing a story?

My life's changed in loads of ways since I met Kathryn, not least because she took me along on this really amazing retreat that we did as part of the Durham book festival last October, with four songwriters, and four authors and poets. The idea was for us to collaborate and make music together, so every person we worked with we explored that very thing: where the line is between fiction and songwriting. It's a distillation. A novel in miniature, and the songwriters that I love the most like Paul Simon, Mark Knopfler, Joni Mitchell, that is what they do. They give you the whole life in that one song.

# Episode 41 - Deon Meyer Fever

*Deon is a bestselling thriller writer from South Africa whose books have been translated in 20 languages, but with his latest book Fever he has written a post-apocalyptic epic with a big heart.*

You've talked about how writing is a journey that not only changes the story, but yourself. Where did that thought come from?

Let me start by saying I find the creative process inscrutable. I find it very hard to describe, all I can tell you is I enjoy it very much. My grandfather has this big pocket watch that tick-tocked very loudly and as a child I often asked him if we could open it up, and look at what's happening inside, and he said, 'The problem is that we might not be able to put it together again, so let's just have it work.' And I feel the same about the writing process, in that I don't really know how it works and I don't want to fiddle too much with the springs and the gears. But here's more or less how it works for me; with *Fever*, specifically, I had a beginning, I had few first chapters that I had to put aside for almost three years, because my agent said the market wasn't quite ready. I still had to establish myself in certain new markets, so I had to write two crime novels before that. And I had an ending in mind, and I had nothing in between, so when I got back to the novel after three years, I *still* didn't have anything in between.



***It is, on the one hand, very intimidating, but intimidation creates a certain energy and a certain fear that generates a lot of creativity.***

I sat down and rewrote. And the next chapter happened, and then the next chapter happened... That is what I mean when I say it is a journey into the unknown. You have to go and discover the story. I'm quoting another author when I say, it's like driving a car at night: you know more or less what your destination is, at least you know what direction you're heading, but all you can see is what is illuminated by the headlights, which is often the next few chapters. Whatever comes after that, you know it's out there, but you gotta go find it, you gotta go right towards it.

## What was the appeal of the post-apocalyptic novel to you?

I loved the story idea. I never think in terms of genre. Half of my work has been typical crime fiction, the other half has been probably more suspense novel material. I've never thought in terms of limiting myself to a specific genre. My approach is that I want to write the story that I feel most passionate about next, and *Fever* was something that I felt very passionate about for a long time. The story idea came together from little bits and pieces over the years and stuck in the back of my head, so I didn't really think too much about the fact that it was speculative fiction, or post-apocalyptic fiction. I see all my work as a story, and I see my job is to tell stories as entertainingly as possible and let someone else worry about the genre.

Had you read any of that genre previously?

Yes, I had. In my teens and twenties, and probably my thirties too, I read all the great classics: Earth Abides, everything I could lay my hands on. I love the genre. Somehow, in my forties and up to now in my late fifties, I haven't read something in that genre for quite a while, but the story came together and the feeling is it had the potential to be a really good story, and that's why I went for it.

You started writing when you were fourteen and your brothers read your first piece of work and told you it was rubbish... then you got back into it in your thirties, is that right?

Yes, towards my mid-thirties. I believe that there are two types of people in the world; those who have such a strong urge to write that they can't *not* do it, and those who have the urge, but it's not quite strong enough to write.

***I always had that need, that urge. I think one is born with it.***

When I was fourteen I wrote a sort-of long short story, and the reaction of my brothers was not conducive to further writing (laughs). I tried again in my twenties. I was working at a

university in South Africa, and I tried to write a novel again, and I realised it was very bad. Pondering it, trying to figure out why it wasn't working, I knew that the characters were very one-dimensional, not interesting at all. My conclusion was that I simply hadn't lived enough to really come to grips with who I am and what humanity, what *people*, are like. I thought maybe I'll never get there, but let me not frustrate myself any further. And then in my thirties I started writing short stories. Again the urge was just too big. It was a pragmatic approach: let me try and write short stories and learn the craft of writing that way. I sold it to a magazine. Wrote another one, and they didn't want it. I just kept going, and for three or four years I just wrote short stories, and I learned so much from it that I finally had enough courage to do the marathon of a novel.

## Did you have any aspirations to get to where you've got to today?

When I started writing it was just after the end of Apartheid. Under Apartheid, no South African novelist writing in Afrikaans had any chance of being published anywhere else, so when my first novel was published two years after the end of Apartheid, I was just extremely happy to find an Afrikaans publisher for it. The funny thing was, back in those days my manuscript was the first suspense novel in something like twenty-five-odd years to reach this publisher, so there really were no editors who understood what to do with it. It was published in a very common and lowbrow fashion with a gaudy cover of a woman with a low cut dress. They didn't know what to do with it, and the book didn't sell very well initially. It was new for everybody. But I had no idea that I could have a career in writing. I think, like many authors, the other fear is always perhaps I'm only a one-trick pony? A one-

novel man. Maybe there isn't another novel inside of me? So, I absolutely had no hope. It's been an incredible journey of surprise and magical things happening.

You've worked in film and TV. When you write now do you think of scenes in terms of a movie?

Not at all. I find writing a novel hard enough just to make it work as a novel. I don't think in any other terms. I *do* think very visually when I write, I can see the scene that I'm writing, I can see very clearly in my head. The magic of novels and short stories is that we all make our own pictures when we read something, or write something. I absolutely don't even think about any other medium.

Fever has multiple story threads. How do you keep track of them?

I use an app called Scrivener (cue much cheering from the hosts). It's the most brilliant writing app out there. I use the column on the right hand side for notes all the time if I do need to keep track of something. I'm so into it when I write that I keep track of everything in my head. The notes are mostly, 'Remember that this might happen to this character in the future.'

## Are you a write every day author?

Yes, I do, but let me add only when I'm at home. When I'm doing book tours, that's impossible. Although, I did a US tour at the very end of a novel and I wanted to finish it, so I did do some writing in hotel rooms in San Francisco, and in Houston, but that was an absolute odd occasion. When I'm home I do write every day.

***There's a wonderful African expression, 'How do you eat an elephant? Bite, bite, bite.' And that's the same way you write a novel: you've got to sit down and bite at it every day.***

## Do you have a structure to your day?

I have a very firm structure. When I started writing I had two small kids, I was a single parent. The only time that I could write — when they were in bed, asleep — was very early in the morning. I used to write from four till about six-thirty in the morning. I fell in love with that time of day, so I still get up about five o'clock every morning. And then I re-write what I did before. I will read through it, and I will re-write it and it usually takes me till breakfast. And then I'll get stuck in and write further.

Scrivener has a wonderful little thing where you can set yourself a target and you know when you want to finish and it tells you how many words you have to do every day. I try to stick with that, but you've got to accept that there will be good days and bad days. When it's a bad day, I just chip away and even if I just write forty or fifty words that's okay, because I know tomorrow, or the day after, I'll catch-up again.

***The most important thing is to sit there and struggle.***

I think it's really important to struggle. Writing is all about making creative choices and solving creative problems. And sometimes you can't solve that problem on the day while you're sitting there, but the more you struggle with it, the more it goes into the subconscious and when you go and have a shower or if you go to bed, the next morning you often wake up with a solution. I'm a great believer in just chipping away even if it's a bad day, then really enjoy the good days.

You've written and directed in TV and film. Did you take away any big lessons from that?

Novel writing and screenwriting influence one another. Everything that you do influences your writing, everything you see, everything you read, everything you hear. Screenplays are a lot about structure, and I think crime fiction especially is also a lot about structure, and I've always been fascinated by structure. Writing a TV series is a completely different structure. The wonderful thing about TV series is that every episode has got its own little dramatic structure, but you've also got the arc of the whole season. In terms of structure I've learned a lot from screenwriting.

## Is there one piece of advice that's stuck with you?

One of the big life lessons, and writing lessons I've learned over the past year or two, especially around *Fever*, is that you've got to accept that you can't please everybody. You can't make everybody happy with a book, and you shouldn't try. I write for only one reader: and that's the reader within me. And I honestly believe that's the only reader we all know. We can't try and write for a British reader, because they are so varied.

***Write for the only reader you know, and that's the one inside of you.***

And read your work from that point of view. Try to please yourself, and you hope there are other people who like your taste, too.

## Was *Fever's* African setting important to you?

All my novels are set in Africa for two reasons: one is that I am in love with the South African landscape, I think it is probably the most beautiful country in the world, and it's also a very dramatic landscape. South Africa is a country that inspires storytelling. We have such a rich tradition. So the two go hand-in-hand for me. I couldn't think of writing a story set anywhere else.

And what advice would you give to your fourteen-year-old self?

You can't please everybody. Try and have as much fun in writing. Writing as a fourteen-year-old was so much fun, and I still try to do that, I still try to have fun. Sometimes it's hard to have fun when you're sitting there and battling. It's got to be a joy, it's got to be a passion, it's got to be something that's fun.



# Episode 43 - Martina Cole,

## Dangerous Lady

*Martina Cole is the undisputed queen of British crime fiction. She's sold over 14 million books and her novels regularly top the Sunday Times bestsellers. She's come a long way from being told 'Women don't write these kinds of books.' We were delighted to speak on the eve of publication of her new paperback **Betrayal**.*

When you started out did you have any aspirations?

When I wrote Dangerous Lady all those years ago — I was only twenty-one when I wrote that, and I kept it for ten years — the only aspiration that I had was to see my name on a book, because I loved books so much. I wanted to see my name on a book, but that was about it. I never thought that I'd be here twenty-five years later.

Did you say it took you ten years to write your first book?

No, I wrote the book, and I kept it in a cupboard for ten years. I wrote two other novels, I wrote scripts, all sorts.

## Why did you keep it hidden away?

I don't know. I was a long time ago. I didn't think anyone would take me seriously as an author. I was moving house and I was just going to throw it all and burn it, and I got *Dangerous Lady* out and I started reading it and I thought, y'know what, that's not bad, I would read that. It all went from there, I rewrote the book, I had six months' sabbatical from my job, got Darley and it all went from there.

## Darley Anderson is your agent?

Yeah, I've still got the same agent and the same publicist and the same publisher twenty-five years on.

## How did you find Darley?

The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook. I thought it was a woman — 'Darley Anderson' — I'd never heard of anyone called Darley. His real name's Thomas! My ex-husband said, 'Who do you keep calling 'darling'? on the phone. I said, 'It's Darley!' I got in touch with him, I told him about *Dangerous Lady*, and he said that's different, women don't write that kind of book. Send it to me. I was writing about the criminal underworld, and I had put a woman in the middle of it all. He got in touch with Headline. I had a bidding auction, and Headline made a pre-emptive bid and that was it.

Why didn't you think anyone would take you seriously?

I've always been a prolific reader, but I just didn't think they would. This girl from a council house etc. I realise now, all these years on, the person reading your book doesn't know anything about you, except what you tell them. They don't know if you're a rocket scientist. They know nothing about you. That's the great thing with writing is you look at Jimmy Herbert and they've come from the same place.

***It's the love of a good story, it's the love of telling a story, that's what makes a good writer.***

Is there any advice that you would give to a young Martina?

Yeah, should've done it ten years earlier! The thing is, the world would have been ready for (protagonist of Dangerous Lady) Maura Ryan then. Women were still getting jobs for beauty. In a lot of ways I think Dangerous Lady was an anti-book in that respect. In the time that wrote it, in the eighties, women were judged on what they looked like. Women in books became supermodels, or went into acting, or the perfume industry, or magazines, and I put this woman into the criminal world, and it worked for me.

## Did you know women like Maura?

Maura was the antithesis of me. I come from a long line of strong women. Irish women. When I was describing her growing up in the sixties, that was where I grew up. Your mum used Nivea and Ponds, there was beeswax on the table, every house smelled the same. It smelled of 'clean'. Unless they were a dirty bitch, of course (laughs). People still washed their front door steps, everything was bleached and disinfected, I think that comes across in my books. I try and capture an era. It's all in the detail, the devil's in the detail. It's a very true expression.

## You're a prolific reader...

I read so much. I read over a hundred books last summer. I read so many books. I could do a book a day. Easily. When I go in a book shop I have to read the first page, to see if I've read it. It's true, because I read so many books. I read lots of crime — I love crime — I also read a lot of historical novels. I love autobiographies as well. One the of the main books that I go back to again and again is Hatter's Castle by AJ Cronin. It was a definitive book for me. It's a big melodrama. I was only about ten or eleven when I first read it, maybe a bit younger, and it absolutely blew me away. The whole concept of the Tay Bridge disaster, the terrible weather in Scotland — oh my God, it's always raining in Scotland — and this man who was so arrogant he had his house built like a castle. He was a hatter. Also, something I never knew till I read that book... Do you know where we get the expression 'Mad as a hatter?' They're all high on the glue. They were gluing all day and that's where 'Mad as a hatter' comes from, they were high as kites.

*It was a defining book for me, because I went into this huge world that I knew nothing about and came out of it feeling like I was an expert.*

Was there one point in your career where you thought,  
‘I’ve made it’?

I was in a restaurant, thinking I’m sure that’s so-and-so, and he came over and said, ‘Oh my God, you’re Martina Cole! I’ve read your books.’ I thought, they know who I am! That was one of the mad ones for me. The main thing is to keep your feet on the ground.

What’s your working day like?

I live in northern Cyprus for much of the year. It’s very, very hot. It’s why I love it out there, and I’ve got a couple of bookshops out there as well, which is nice for me. My dream was always to have my own bookshops. I still work through the night, because it’s cooler out there. I’ve always worked through the night because it’s quieter.

*When I was writing **Dangerous Lady** years ago, I used to hear the milkman and think I’d better go to bed in a minute. Now I listen for my chickens and my cockerel.*

## Has seeing your work adapted for TV and theatre changed the way that you write?

I often have a big say in the process. I make sure that I script edit, I co-produced on some of them with Lavinia Warner, and you get a say in casting, the script and everything. I would advise anyone to make sure that you keep that. It hasn't changed the way that I write. I think people need to remember that when you're watching something you're showing a story, when you're reading something you're reading a story. It's like with Audible books; if the person reading it doesn't capture the essence of the book, then you're not going to carry on listening to it, y'know? I think it's (the same) with television as well, and especially the plays. I love seeing the plays, because I love theatre anyway. I put a play on Broadway years ago, and I've put on four plays with Stratford theatre, and it's a completely different ball game. When we first did Dangerous Lady and, more recently, The Take, it's nice to see how the actors portray your characters. I can't fault Tom Hardy. He was Freddie Jackson. He *was* him.

## Are you someone who outlines a novel, or do you jump in?

The strange thing is, I always have a beginning and middle and an end, and then it all changes. I start writing and I have all these good intentions and then I introduce characters, and other things happen, and it just gets more convoluted. For me, that's the

perfect way to write. I have a premise, the core of the story, and then it all goes from there and gets bigger and bigger.

You have a loyal and vociferous fanbase. Do you write for them or yourself?

I've never written for an audience. I've always written for myself. When I do writers' conferences, even the ones in the prisons, I always say to them, don't try and please other people, try and please yourself. Write something you'd want to read and the chances are other people will want to read it, too. I pick up books at times and I know they've been written for an audience, for another author. I like to read a book that's personal. The thing is, a book can sell a million copies but that's your book. Doesn't matter how many millions of people have read it, once you buy that book that's your book, and you're reading it. And you get so many pretenders come up now. The Girl On The Train was one of the most fantastic books I'd ever read. It blew me away. I was really annoyed that the film was in America, but that's another story. Every time I saw 'Girl' on a book... you get overkill. Everywhere I looked I saw 'Girl'. They're also-rans.

How did your prison work come about?

I do a lot of writing classes in prisons. I do a lot of the top security prisons. I really, really enjoy it. I do Styal women's (prison) It's nice to go in and get people reading. I'm part of the Reading Agency, I'm an ambassador for them to get people reading. When we were doing

the Six Book Challenge it was just fantastic. It grieves me; we've got the best education in the world, and then suddenly you go into the prisons and so few young men can read and write. It's shocking. Not just to prisons. We go to workplaces, we go all over just encouraging people to read. Getting people to realise there's a whole world in a book. You can lose the rest of the world in a book.

## What do you enjoy most about being an author?

Just sitting down to write. And there aren't many jobs where you go places and people tell you how great you are all the time! I'm sure it doesn't happen if you're a banker.

## Is there one piece of advice you've had that's always stuck with you?

I've had some great advice over the years. Most of it unrepeatable! The one that really stuck in my head was from Darley, my agent, and he said to me, 'Never lose sight of who you are, no matter what happens.' And I never did. And I think that's really important. No matter how successful you become, keep as normal as you can. It's the most important thing of all. My Darley's fantastic. He's been my agent for twenty-six years, and we're still on a handshake. Old school.



## Any advice for us as we go into our edit?

If it's too long, cut it. Keep the reader interested. Sometimes you can go on a bit too much about the same thing. There's only so many ways you can say certain things. Unless you're writing sex books, then you can do what you like (laughs). Fifty Shades Of Grey. I've always said, if that was set in a caravan in Eastbourne it would be an episode of Criminal Minds, wouldn't it?

***The main thing about an edit is to stay true to the characters. Make sure that when you do the edit that you're taking out what's unnecessary and keeping in what's necessary. That's why you have an editor, to put you in your place!***

# Episode 44 - Jennifer Niven

## Heart First

*Jennifer Niven is a phenomenally successful YA novelist. All The Bright Places was a Goodreads Choice award winner and is now being adapted for a film starring Elle Fanning. We spoke to Jennifer not long after her tour of Australia and New Zealand...*

*All The Bright Places* and *Holding Up The Universe* are quite different from what you had written before, aren't they?

Absolutely. I started my career in non-fiction and wrote these two books about Arctic expeditions, Ada Blackjack being one, and my first book was called *The Ice Master*. Very quickly the media started called me 'Arctic Girl'. Nothing against the Arctic, but for me the story is not because of the Arctic. That's not why I wrote those books. The reason I wrote them is because of the stories themselves, which I fell in love with. I made the conscious decision then to turn to something different, and I started working on an adult historical novel. All The Bright Places and Holding Up The Universe are a whole other career for me.

*All The Bright Places* deals with some very sensitive subjects. How do you approach topics like that?

In the spring of 2013 I lost my literary agent, very suddenly and unexpectedly. I had been with him for fifteen years, and the last conversation we had in person he said to me whatever you write next, I want you to write it because you can't imagine writing anything else, not even if it terrifies you. I knew exactly what that was. Years ago I loved a boy who had bi-polar disorder, and I lost him to suicide. I always knew that I wanted to write something about him, something about that experience, because it was life-changing for me and it was very profound, but I didn't know if I could, because it was so personal and so hard to go back to. That summer I thought about what my agent said and I thought this is a way to honour him and a way to honour this boy I loved. I sat down to try to write the story which became *All The Bright Places*.

***I told myself even if no one knows that I'm doing this right now, they never have to know if it doesn't work and I'm not able to do it.***

I came out very quickly and I wrote it in about six weeks. The thing that really informed it the most for me was this experience and knowing this boy and just seeing firsthand what he went through, his struggles to be in the world every single day. Beyond that, I also wanted to do my due diligence by talking to experts, by having people read the manuscript who were experts in the mental health field or suffered with bi-polar, or depression, or suicidal tendencies themselves. Just to really make sure that it read authentically, especially because it's a huge responsibility, especially when you're writing for teens, with subjects like this.

## Did that research come after the first draft?

The first draft was written just out of my heart, and memory of this boy. Then, yes, that research really came after the fact. It was then giving the manuscript over and sharing it, and also asking many, many, many questions and then going back over the draft that I had written.

## Was there much that changed after that?

There really wasn't. Just knowing him like I did, and just knowing from what we talked about and what he was going through... He always wanted me to try to understand what he was feeling and experiencing. That's where it came from.

## Has that experience changed how you write?

Absolutely. It's interesting, I went to film school for my graduate school, and I went to study screenwriting, and something that my fellow screenwriters said to me that I always kept with me, was they were worried that I wasn't really able to open up on the page the way I needed to, and really tap into all of my own personal emotions and experiences. I kept that with me, and I thought maybe I'm not able to do that? I can do it in bits and pieces with my non-fiction and with my adult fiction, but *All The Bright Places* was the first novel that proved to me that I can do that. I haven't stopped since then. I went to an event in March and when we were taking audience questions this young boy said, 'Jennifer, will you promise that you will keep writing brave, honest books for people like me who need them?' And I said, 'Absolutely! I will not be going back now that I know I can do this.'

## Do you find that it's easier doing it way round? Heart first, then fill in the gaps with research?

I do. I did the historical novels and the non-fiction books, which of course are really, really research-heavy. Those I had to do the research.

***With this one it went against my instinct to start from the heart, but it was really necessary otherwise you can't really get into that emotional flow that you need to just let the story out.***

You want to feel all of the emotions that you need to feel as you're writing. Otherwise your readers aren't going to feel those same emotions. I think if you're stopping and starting all the time to do the research it pulls you out of it in a way that can be harmful to the writing process.

## Was it hard to write, or was it like a release?

I reimagined a lot of things, because I didn't want it to be a memoir. The challenge for me mostly was tapping into the emotion and then there were certain scenes in the book that were harder to write than others. In some ways it came out very easily, but in other ways there were hard days where I knew I had to face something that was not something I wanted to sit down and spend the day with. I had a young writer ask me recently, 'How did you write *All The Bright Places* without crying?' and I said, oh my gosh, I cried *a lot*, which maybe will make my readers feel better since I know they cry a lot when they read it.

***You have to be able to feel those emotions when you're writing it, otherwise your readers aren't going to feel it.***

## Did the book's success take you by surprise?

Absolutely. I still can't believe it. I just got back from Australia and New Zealand and I've been really touring the world for the past three years with *All The Bright Places*, and it never escapes me I'm there because of this book. I meet readers, and hear from readers all over the world, daily, who are impacted in big ways or small ways by this novel and the letters I get and the messages I get and the people who I meet all say 'The book saved my life in some way.' I didn't anticipate that, just writing about this boy that I loved.

## Were you involved in the marketing of the book?

### Particularly in the UK with the Zoella Book Club?

I've had the great good fortune of working with the most amazing publishers around the world, but particularly in North America and the UK, and the marketing campaigns are all things that they came up with, although they do involve me in them. They want to know if I have any ideas, and they want to run things past me. The teams have been amazing and so innovative, it's also been handled so sensitively, which is important for a book with a subject matter like this. And then the Zoella Book Club, I was thrilled and excited. Apparently Zoella knew she wanted to do *All The Bright Places*, she had read it and loved it, and she knew she wanted it to be the launch title for the book club. I can't tell you what that means to me.

The YA readership is a very discerning readership, very passionate. Were you aware of it before you wrote *All The Bright Places*?

I wasn't terribly aware of it. Only in the sense that I loved reading YA, but I didn't really have the knowledge. I had no idea just how passionate and how enthusiastic and how discerning these readers are. I've written for adults and hands-down the YA audience is my favourite, because they are so passionate and so honest, and so smart, and I just feel very honoured to be writing for them, and I appreciate them so much.

Your latest book, *Holding Up The Universe*, deals with issues of weight and self-image. How did that come about?

It wasn't as clearly personal as *All The Bright Places*, but it came from different parts of my life and the lives of people close to me. With Libby, who is my female character in *Holding Up The Universe*, she is struggling with the body image issues that other people have about her, because Libby is very heavy. She's obese. She has been her whole life, and she's been bullied for it. But she sees herself clearly and she's very confident and she's been through everything you can go through with bullying, and horrible social media bullying, and in-person bullying, and I thought it was so important to represent not just the slim, or average-sized heroine of YA literature. We need to see more diversity and that's something that YA does very well. That came from my own

personal experiences, it also came from experiences of people in my family, and a really good friend of mine. Libby, to me, was just so inspiring to write, and she's my hero in many ways. There's a little bit of me in her, but she's really her own person too.

## Have you had that experience with other characters in your books?

I have. In all my books there are pieces of me in all of them. There are personal things in all of them, and some are more identifiable than others to the outside, but I definitely feel that however many pieces of me are in my characters, the characters are all their own people. Especially with Finch (from *All The Bright Places*). When I thought about Finch, I thought about this boy I loved, but now when I think about Finch, the first thing I think of is Finch, because he's very much his own person. They become real to you. They're like family in a way. They're my literary family.

## We talked about characters with Erica James. She will observe people around her and then invent lives for them. Is that familiar to you?

Absolutely, and it takes on this life that you just don't anticipate. The characters do, and the story does as well. It's wonderful to look back on stories that I've written and I can see what I was going through at the time, but then they have gone off in these amazing ways that I didn't anticipate.



## Can you tell us about 'Find Finch' on social media?

All The Bright Places is being made into a film, and Elle Fanning is going to be Violet, which I'm very excited about. She became attached to it about eight or nine months before the book was actually out, and no one knew that I had pictured Elle when I wrote the book. Even though Violet is very much me, I needed to picture someone else in order to have enough objectivity in order to write this character who was so much like me. I pictured Elle Fanning, and was thrilled when she signed-on to play Violet, and now we have now cast Finch, mainly because the director Miguel Arteta, who is amazing, wants to wait until just about a month before shooting because we want to cast an actor who's age-appropriate, and we don't want a twenty-six-year-old playing Finch, we want a nineteen-/twenty-year-old, but the problem with boys that age is that they can, overnight, turn into thirty-year-old men. So, Find Finch is my way of sharing the list of actors who are on the Finch list, and we want readers to be involved as possible in the process, because we know how important Finch is to them. So, I'm getting them to vote on their Finches. These are the possible actors, which ones do you think would be the best Finch? It's inspired these conversations. Every Monday I do Movie Monday, and I reveal another actor on the Finch List, and it's quite exciting to see the response and see the polite, but strong, conversations that are being had between people on social media. They're very passionate.

## You're adapting the book for screen. Is that terrifying?

I am enjoying it now, but at first it was absolutely terrifying. Miguel, the director, was the one who said to the producers that he thought I should be the one to write this script, because it's such a personal story, and he felt like only I could do it. I can't tell you how much that meant to me, and I how much I appreciated that vote of confidence, but at the same time it was so intimidating. I knew the producers were a bit like, 'Oh-kay...' Now they're very much on board, but at first they very

wary. It's been a fascinating process. It's become a very different thing in my mind. *All The Bright Places* as a movie is very different to the book, just in the sense that it's a different process for writing, and you almost have to think of them as two different entities.

You hear the phrase 'Kill Your Darlings' from screenwriters all the time. Have you had to make any really tough decisions?

Definitely. And that's one of the first things I learned in film school, Kill Your Darlings. You have to be willing and able to do that. To realise that the work will be stronger if you can do that. We've had to make some decisions... At first, I said to Miguel I think this would be great if we could do a three-parter, like *The Hobbit*, and we could include every scene, and he said, 'Mm-hmm. No, that's not happening.' Since I can't do that I've had to get rid of some scenes that I would love to have seen in the movie. But the thing is, at the end of the day, and this is a thing that I've told readers, I want to make sure that it's the story that you have read on the page is the way it *feels* on the screen. Even if some of those scenes aren't there, even if there's a scene that's new, I want you to feel the same way you felt when you read the book.

What does it feel like stepping back and looking at your career so far?

It feels surreal, and everything goes so quickly and there are so many exciting things, and it's hard to take a moment now and then, which is something my mother always said to me, 'Make sure you

absorb this and really let it in, because these are amazing once in a lifetime things that happen, and you have to really feel them.' I try to do that, but it's hard, but every now and then it will hit me. Most recently I was in Australia, and I was talking to someone about the screenplay and there was all these amazing, lovely fans, who were so excited and bringing me gifts and fan art they had made, and I thought I have to take a moment, right now, and just let this in, because it's just amazing and it never, ever gets old and I never don't appreciate it, and I never forget that it all started, again, with this boy I loved and then blank page and this story.

## How old were you when you first started writing?

I think I was probably seven or eight. It was as soon as I could really master the alphabet and put words together I was writing. My mom was a writer. I'm an only child and I think if she had any hope of getting any writing time herself, she had to instill writing time into my childhood routine once she figured out that I loved creating stories, so we would have writing time together, and it was so special, and she really taught me to find the story in everything.

All of the things I learned from her about life, not just writing, pertain to the writing as well. I knew that she loved me unconditionally, so I knew unconditional love from her, and I also learned from her that I should never, ever limit myself, and I could be or do anything I put my mind to. I think that's something that's informed my life and also my writing. She always taught me to be lovely, and to make the world a lovelier place, and I think that's something I try to do with my readers, especially on social media, which can sometimes not be a lovely place, but I try to create a safe space for them where they know it's all about positivity.

## Are you a write every day writer?

I am. At this point I have to be. I've been a professional writer for twenty years. I've been fortunate enough to not need to do anything outside of that. That means a lot of discipline, and a lot of working, working, working... I show up to my desk every day and I work probably, depending on the day, eight to sixteen hours, depending on what's happening. Sometimes I work seven days a week, sometimes I work five. I love the creative part of it, but so much of it now is the business of writing. It's emails and publicity and promotion and just any number of different projects that you're working on for your publishers. You have to be very protective of the creative part. Carve that time out and make sure that it happens.

My natural writing clock kicks in around 4pm and goes on till midnight. I can't always follow that schedule. I will definitely work on the morning and write whenever I am able to, and there are days when I shut everything out, and I go into what I call the writing cave and I just write all day.

***The writing encompasses the brainstorming and the outlining, the character work, and all of the prep work that you do before you go into the book.***

## You're a big outliner?

Y'know, I'm not. You have the terms pantsier and plotter, I'm definitely somewhere in-between. I think of it as a road trip: I know when I'm starting, I almost always know where I'm going to end up, and I know the general route that I'm taking.

***But I have to leave myself open to all the detours along the way that are unexpected***

And I don't know everything that's going to happen on the way to my end point. I know the way, the route of the path of my story, and I know my characters really well. For me it's about knowing the characters and the overall story that I want to tell.

## Do you build characters before writing them, or do you prefer to discover them as you go?

There are definitely things to discover as you move along, but I prefer to do as much work as I can beforehand, because if I know them really well, they're going to influence the plot, they will be able to tell me if something I'm trying to make them do is not going to work, they'll also be able to inform me where they need to go next.

***For me, I need to know them as well as possible, and one way I do that is to make playlists for my main characters and it's a great way of being able to drop into their world emotionally.***

Especially if you're writing dual narration, as I have been with *All The Bright Places* and *Holding Up The Universe*, and you have these two voices that you need to keep unique and distinct. That's a great way of going, okay this is Jack from *Holding Up The Universe*, here's his playlist, I'm going to listen to that while I write his chapter and then I'll switch to Libby's playlist when I go to Libby's voice and her world.

One thing I also do is storyboard the book itself with songs. I will do a playlist for the book, and again I don't know every detail of what's going to happen, but I know that overall emotional arc that I want to follow with the book, and the music will help take me there.

## What's it been like touring the books?

I love it. So much of the writing is solitary work, and you have to be able to be alone with the work, and be comfortable with that, which I definitely am, but there's another part of me that loves to go out into the world and travel and meet people. I love both parts of it. It's hard to write while I'm on the road, because the schedule is very full, and also it's just hard to really be alone with the work the way you need to. For me, the best part is getting to meet these readers. I've toured all over the States, but I've also been to the Philippines, to Puerto Rico and Brazil and the UK a couple of times, and Italy and most recently Australia and New Zealand and it's just amazing to get to meet these readers who you wouldn't normally get to meet, and just thank them in person for all they mean to you and the books.

## What are the things you learn from readers?

I just hear so many moving stories about how the book has impacted them and there are many, many tears. I've been cried on quite a lot, and I have done my share of crying in return and many hugs and just beautiful, beautiful fans who I feel so honoured that they would share their stories with me. Sometimes what they'll do, because they know that they won't have a lot of time with you at a signing, depending on what kind of event it is, they'll write a beautiful letter to you ahead of time, and then give it to you so you can take it home and so you know everything that they wanted to tell you. I treasure every single thing that I get from them.

## And you have Fan Art Friday?

Yes, they're so talented. And it never escapes me that they're taking the time to do this and they're making this fan art and paying this lovely tribute to your book and your characters, I feel like Fan Art Friday is the least I can do. I can't showcase all of them, but I look at all the ones that they tag me on and like them because they're beautiful.

## Looking beyond the movie, what's next for you?

I am working on my third YA novel right now, and that is in very early stages and I can't quite talk about it yet, but it's another very personal story. I also have just sold a project with another YA author, and I can't reveal, but probably by the time this comes out that will have been announced. I'm very excited about that.

## What advice would you have for us collaborators?

Collaboration is so interesting because writing by yourself can be wonderful, but there are times too when you wish gosh I wish someone else could weigh in on this. I think with collaboration it's so wonderful to have each other there to be able to be open to any sort of idea, to be able to have that great communication and say, 'Hmm, okay, I hear you, and that's an interesting idea, but no...'. It's all in how you communicate with each other and be honest but kind, of course, and just really think about what's the best thing for the work.

***For me that's whether it's an editor or a collaborator, that's always the most important thing: what's going to serve the work the best?***

**Is this the first time that you've done a collaboration?**

It is like this. I've done collaboration in television. I did a project with my best high school friend, and Charlie Sheen, of all people. Which is a book in and of itself. I also did a collaboration with the same friend and Philip Seymour Hoffman, and that was an amazing experience. I've only really done them in the television world and now the film world, but this has been a different experience, but I've really loved it. It has really been wonderful.



# Episode 45 - Katherine May -

## Creative Writing Cocktails

*Katherine May is an award-winning writer, blogger and the programme director of creative writing at Canterbury, Christ Church University. She is an extraordinary talent, makes a mean gin cocktail, and has an incredible series of books called The Whitstable High Tide Swimming Club coming in the next year...*

Your new series is coming in three parts in quick succession. How did that come about?

There was an odd conversation between me and the editor, Sam Eades. I had worked with her at a previous publisher and she contacted me last summer while on holiday in Devon, and I had this long conversation with her standing on Dartmouth Harbour where she asked me to write a novel about robot romance, and I said I don't think I can do that. But I pitched her the Whitstable High Tide Swimming Club, about women getting together to swim together. She said she had a few ideas for me; it could be about robot romance, or it could be about a special place that everyone would like, and I said right, we'll do that. I live in Whitstable. Everyone loves Whitstable.

## How would you describe Whitstable?

It's a gorgeous little seaside town, with a beautiful harbour, great food and a lovely shingle beach. I love a shingle beach better than a sandy beach because you don't get sand in your food, so it's absolutely perfect.

## The editor came to you pitching ideas. It's usually the other way round, isn't it?

Yeah, I didn't have to go begging this time. It's a first for me, let's put it that way, but I obviously didn't shame myself too much last time. I've always got loads of ideas in my head anyway, so as I spoke to Sam and got a feeling of what she was after... She was interested in female friendship, something quite heartwarming, and I'd had this idea about a year before. I went through my mental file and brought it to mind and began to talk to Sam about it. She had a few ideas to mould the text, and between us we came up with a pitch. It's a very different way to any way that I've worked before, but I actually enjoyed it. It was quite collaborative.

## Where did the idea of it being a three-parter come from?

That was one of Sam's ideas. I think she'd seen that some other authors had done it, but when she mentioned it to me I loved the idea because it seemed like such a challenge, to make sure that you had a full arc in each section, but that they all related to each other, and then that they could be put together into a book at the end. I loved the idea that by the time the first one was out, the third one wouldn't be written yet. That seemed like a really tricky challenge. Normally I go back and rewrite the beginning. I love working under constraints. It's been very seat-of-the-pants. I had another book to deliver in March, so I started writing this one in April. I've had two months to write each third of the book. And I work full-time, so it's been pretty intense. I'm also finishing a PhD this year as well!

## Did this scheduling come from the publisher or you?

It's definitely come from the publisher. Sam's a data geek, so I'm led by her and she had this very strong idea that it had to begin in the summer, because it's a very summery book, and the spacing came from the pace that I'm writing. One of the important things about it is the three parts get delivered quite close together, so there's a kind of momentum, so that readers remember it between the various bits. For people who read a load of books by the same author I guess it serves them really well because they can pick up those books really quickly. It's much harder as an author. There's something really fun about that pace if you really like writing, which I do, luckily.

## You joined a sea swimming club. Are you mad?

I haven't joined a club, but I have started sea swimming a lot more often, and sometimes with lots of different friends, and I have taken part in the New Year swim that happens at Whitstable. With a hangover, I should add... It's awesome, actually. It takes so much courage to go in there. You get into your swimming costume on the beach, and you feel cold already, and then you run into this absolutely freezing water. Not everybody should do it, you need to be in good fitness, you need to know your circulation's all right, but it's the most exhilarating thing you could imagine. You run in, it's absolutely freezing, and you get this hit of joy from it somehow. The endorphins start pumping and then you run out again, stand on the beach and drink a Bloody Mary and go, 'I want to go back in again!' and everyone talks you down from it. It's the most fun that you can possibly have with most of your clothes off. There are about thirty or forty of us all doing it at once, and we waited on the beach to assemble, then someone yelled and we all ran in straight away, had a quick float, then ran out again. It's not a sedate activity. When I first moved to Whitstable, I had a house on the seafront and I remember looking out of my window in the middle of the night — we moved in November — and seeing people swimming. There's always someone in the water at Whitstable, because someone gets inspired to skinny-dip, or whatever. I went for a run yesterday and got incredibly hot, it must have been thirty-five degrees yesterday, and when my run finished I was on quite a quiet bit of the beach and I thought what the hell, so I stripped down to my underwear and went for a swim. That is a fantastic thing to have on hand when you've just finished a long, hot run. It's gorgeous in there. To get into the cold water and have a really leisurely swim and stay in for a while.

## Did the swimming club inspire the book, or did the book inspire the swimming?

A little bit of both. Having swum at Whitstable for a while I knew to wait till the absolute high tide to swim, because as soon as the tide goes out a tiny bit it goes shallow and it's impossible to swim, and you see people that don't know the sea getting tricked out. They go wading in and it's ankle-deep for miles. I began to think of this idea of how the same people meet at the same time on the beach every day and how a community might form around that of different people, and also the idea that you might turn to swimming at times of crisis in your life, and you might swim to solve your problems. I suppose that's where it came from. As I began to write about it, people began to want to swim with me more, it's quite interesting. People don't always have the nerve to get into the water, it's like there's a big barrier to cross. I've swum with far more people this year than I ever have before because they've all wanted to join me. Quite often now I get texts when high tide's coming up saying, 'Are you swimming today? Do you fancy it?' which is just lovely. It's really sociable.

## You started something called the Re-authoring Project. What can you tell us about that?

The Re-authoring Project came from when my first novel came out, Burning Out, which was about 2009, quite a long time ago, and I just realised how limited the opportunities were for authors to talk about their work. It was a little bit before all the podcasts had

grown-up and Twitter was still very young, and I felt like authors spent a lot of time talking to each other about their books rather than to an actual audience, so it became quite a closed loop. I've got a longstanding interest in installation art. I used to work at Tate Britain and at the National Gallery, so I've got a good understanding of the art world, I've got an interest in physical theatre and performance, so I got together with a couple of other creative producers and we formed an organisation that aimed to support writers to make more interesting performances of their own work, with interactivity in mind.

***That very traditional author reading where you get up on a stage and you read from your book is actually really intimidating to anyone that hasn't got natural reading skills, so we used to work with authors to get them to think about how they like to interact.***

For example, one author that we worked with produced some puppetry. She worked with some figures to animate them in front of a crowd. Other people created interactive events, where they could talk to people one-to-one and story tell on a really personal basis. Some people worked with objects and installed work. One author installed a recording of their voice in a bus shelter, so people could sit down and listen to it, and she didn't need to perform live, because that was when she found she choked, but she could happily record her voice. We really work to analyse their preferences and to make them think about exactly how they wanted to interact. I created a performance for my novel, which toured festivals, where I used live projection on stage to take people through a distillation of the story of the book. It was huge fun.

You've written under a pseudonym. What was there a specific reason for doing that?

There was a very specific reason. I was writing about my sex life! It emerged from the re-authoring work. I realised there were stories I wanted to tell that I maybe would feel to embarrassed to walk into the office the next day and confront my colleagues about.

***The gift of the internet is that you can wear a new identity so quickly.***

I wanted to write about sex in long-term relationships, and to tell the truth about how sex changes over time and how we're all presenting this bravado all the time about how we're having this amazing sex life, and actually it dies off over time. I wanted to be able to be honest and tender about that at the same time. I was working in schools at that point. A really, really difficult thing to write about under my own name. I conceived of the name, and as soon as I thought of the name, I could get an email address, a blog, a Twitter account, and actually it was incredibly quick to construct that identity.

***What surprised me about writing under a pseudonym was the change it made in me.***

It let me talk in a way that I wouldn't normally talk. It let me adopt a new voice. It let me have conversations and consider ideas that perhaps I wouldn't have been open to as myself. It de-politicised a lot of the stories around sex for me, it was really interesting.

## Quite a liberating experience, then?

Massively. Really life-changing. I ended up in conversations with people who have become friends, who I would never have met in real life. I got to know Barbara Carrellas, who is this fantastically inspirational queer-tantric-sex-practitioner who teaches people how to use tantra for kink. I went to see her at a sex festival in Berlin, somewhere I had never set foot in before. It was the most scared I've ever been in my whole life.

***I learned to listen to people whose views were not the same as mine, whose experience was different and learned a hell of a lot.***

## Did you imagine this pseudonym as a fictional character?

Betty Herbert started as a performance of an aspect of me, and over time became a different identity that I could drop into. I found it really useful to be able to perform somebody else, and Betty became me. There are loads of people who still call me Betty and know me as Betty. The problem with Betty is that people believed in her too much, and so it was very hard to then start saying actually I'm a slightly separate person to Betty, and a little bit different. It made life quite complicated after a while. Betty and I did a slow parting of the ways. As soon as the book came out, I came out as my real identity, which I wanted to do. It didn't need to be a secret anymore, I wasn't embarrassed by it, and I didn't want anyone to be able to out me, or anything horrible like that, which has happened with



other sex bloggers. I finished the book pregnant, unsurprisingly, and then had my son, and my life changed a lot anyway. I gradually found myself creeping out from that identity, and gradually made the switch to being Katherine. It's only this year that I removed my previous Twitter handle, which was @52Betty, and became Katherine May on Twitter.

Tell us about your other new book, *The Electricity Of Every Living Thing*. It involves the coastline again, doesn't it?

It does. I'm a great lover of the sea, and love being outdoors, and so *The Electricity Of Every Living Thing* is a memoir about the year I tried to walk the south west coast path and ended up learning that I was autistic. It was a really seismic year in my life, where I had this massive shifting of identity, and I think what the book recounts is how I knew that there was something I needed to learn about myself and walking opened up the space to me to explore it and be receptive to finding it out.

How do you discover autism on a nice, long walk?

I started the walk because I had struggled with motherhood, which is something that it's very difficult for people to admit to. I had been completely overwhelmed by it in a way that I could that other women weren't. And as I began to walk I began to connect that in my mind to other points in my life when I had been overwhelmed that I had kind of forgotten, or deliberately pushed out of my mind and began to see a pattern, which meant that one day

when I was driving home from work and I heard a woman on the radio talking about what it was like to be autistic it was just this moment of, 'Yeah, of course.' It was almost as if I'd always known that. The information just dropped into my head like it had been there forever. So after that it was a process of coming to terms with what that meant for my personal identity, to know that about myself, and to learn to live with that knowledge and that understanding. Which ultimately makes life much, much easier when you're not fighting against what you are.

## As an author of fiction, why did you choose to go with non-fiction with this book?

Having written *52 Seductions* as Betty, that was a memoir. I did all the things in real life (don't tell my dad) that happened in *52 Seductions*. I guess as a reader I love non-fiction and memoir, and that's about personal preference, but also I think politically it's really important for us to begin to hear voices of women like me, who are living a life that hasn't really been accounted for before. The idea of women being autistic is quite a new one. There are still people who don't think it's possible. And the idea of women living a successful, happy life with a husband and a child and all of these things are things we don't expect from autistic women. The story of autism is a story that's been told about men. You may have seen the film of [Temple Grandin with Clare Danes](#), that was relatively famous, but I think autistic people in general are presented as very 'other' and very different, very mechanical, very disabled, and what's been emerging in the last few years is that loads of load of adult women have been diagnosed with autism and we're beginning to understand that actually we're getting on okay, we just need some help with things

around the edges and we don't respond in the way that you might expect all women to respond.

Have you found that other authors have started talking to you about what they've discovered?

That links to 52 seductions, in that we bloggers who write about our lives tend to get together and talk about how it feels to expose so much of yourself. I've come across loads of other people that are writing about autism online and women that are writing about their diagnoses and how they get by. I've found a whole community of people who finally, for the first time in my life, I think 'You sound just like me, I totally relate to that.' I've gone through my whole life never feeling like I'm like other women. And it's an incredibly powerful moment for me to finally relate to a social group.

***It's a top tip for writing. If you find the space to write in that hits you emotionally, that's got stuff in it that you really need to talk about, then writing becomes incredibly easy.***

Nature plays a big part in this book. You set yourself a particular challenge, didn't you?

I wanted to walk the entire south west coast path, six hundred and thirty miles of it, before I turned forty. I didn't make the whole six hundred and thirty miles, I have to say! That was

one of the interesting bits of learning for me. I had spent my life setting myself challenges that I couldn't possibly meet, because I had no sense of who I was and what I could cope with. Any sensible person would have realised that with a three-year-old, as I had at the time, and a job, and all sorts of other things going on, that it was an absolutely silly and impossible task, and the challenge lay in finding that out.

***I think it's okay to do things that are too hard. I think it's brilliant to find your limits of what's too hard for you, rather than always doing stuff that you find easy.***

I realised that I was a lot tougher than I thought I was. There were moments where I was absolutely exhausted. It only ever rained on me, I don't think I ever walked on a sunny day. I thought I might just die and fall off a cliff and no one would ever find me again. I was on my own, I couldn't call on other people to come and rescue me, because the path is very remote, so unless you can get to the next town, there's nothing you can do. I learnt that I could tough things out that I didn't realise I could.

## Did your writing change after that?

It became much more imbued with the world around me. I became interested in the really rich textures and the depth of the natural world and the flat surfaces that we encounter every day. When you're the mother of a young child you spend a lot of time in soft play centres, which are very plasticky. I found that as I walked there were loads of layers of information for me to learn about, which of course as an autistic person I really enjoyed getting really geeky about exactly what rock I was walking next to and what were the wild flowers and what were the birds flying past me. Also that it's incredibly soothing, that

environment. It's as noisy as everyday life, but the noises are somehow more gentle on the ear, and more like the kind of thing that my ears wanted to listen to.

## What do you do when you get to the end of your first draft?

You've got to put it away for a while, But, you should also celebrate the end of your first draft. You have to celebrate every single point. It's so hard. So many people never finish a book, even in first draft. Go out and celebrate it, and then you leave it alone for a little while and you come back to it with fresh eyes. A fortnight would do.

***You could read other people's work that's really different to what you've been writing. Just refresh your brain by turning it on to something else.***

There's something particular about writing that never quite gives you that moment of triumph. You're always a little bit dissatisfied with the draft, or you've turned to worry about whether anyone will buy it, or if anyone's going to give it any publicity. Or you're wrangling over the cover. There's always something that kills your good mood about writing. You just have to grasp those opportunities to be happy about it when you can, and pat yourself on the back and say this sucks a tiny bit at the moment, but I've still achieved something really big. I'm less awful than I was yesterday. It's really good to mark those key moments. First draft is a key moment, Final draft is a key moment. The book coming out is a key moment. You've got to enjoy them all.

You're the programme director for creative writing at Canterbury Christ Church University. What does that involve?

We run a professional writing BA for undergraduates, and a creative writing MA. I look after both programmes, make sure that students are happy, the staff's happy, that kind of thing.

Who would you recommend should go on such a course?

Our undergraduate degree is for people who've got an interest in writing and really want to develop their voice and pick up really precise grammar, understand the different markets that writers can work in. We've got a big focus on getting people a job, because authors need day jobs, we all know that, right? So, that's a very practical course in lots of ways, but still with loads of lovely creative elements.

The MA is for people that have been writing for a while, are passionate about writing and really want to fine-tune that voice. we tend to attract much older students to that, so people from their thirties onwards. We do have some people in their twenties, but the profile tends to be older. It's also for people who really want think about themselves as an author in the market and to start thinking about how they need to react and interact with people: social

media, presentational things, how to approach agents and publishers, and also how to think about yourself as somebody who's a specialist in a particular genre.

***Really getting people to stop saying, 'Oh, I just like writing,' and start saying, 'No, I'm an author and this is what I'm trying to do.'***

We teach the basics of marketing, to look at the market in terms of very specific segments and to think about specialising in what segment they're trying to appeal to. We get people to think really hard about how to try to talk to your audience and not to an audience in general. I feel like I spend an awful lot of my time saying, 'You're not writing for everyone, you are writing for forty-five-year-old women who like knitting, and that's great because you love those people and you've got to show them some affection.' It's massively important. To take the wider point, I think we are a very deliberately commercially focused MA, and we're conscious that there's a tendency in universities to try and intellectualise writing and to encourage people into experimental forms and to the extreme literary end of writing. We wanted to do something different. We wanted to take in students who wanted to write the next bestseller. Our ambition as a programme is that we would like to have been the programme that gave a first to Dan Brown.

***What we've got to stop doing as academics is stop teaching students to write books that nobody wants to buy in the market, and instead help them to write the book that they want to read themselves.***

It's something that we've thought really hard about as a team, and we know we may be a little bit different to everybody else, but that's such a great position to be in. We really want

to honour those writers that are writing not for other highbrow authors but are writing for a general readership.

Apparently you make a mean cocktail. Does that help your writing?

I write sober, unlike Ernest Hemingway. I'm a keen cook anyway, and I think that mixing a cocktail is almost like cooking a whole meal. You can get all those flavours in, and really play with it and experiment and it's massive fun. I also like to make my own alcohols as well. Elderflower gin, blackcurrant vodka, I quite enjoy a little bit of messing around. I make my own rose hip syrup, which makes a really nice rose hip negroni, and last week I made some elderflower cordial, which has gone a bit wrong and has fermented, so I seem to have made some fizzy elderflower desert wine.

What advice do you have for us as we approach our deadline?

I like to make a big spreadsheet that lays out every single day that I've got left. I have targets for those days. And I have lovely little formulae that add up the number of words and give me a percentage of how much I'm on target. I do think the only way to do it is to break the task up into individual tasks and really plan, unless you're someone that enjoys doing everything last minute, which I absolutely hate, you're going to find yourself writing the last quarter of your book in a week, screaming and crying and it's just not worth it.



As I've gone on with my magnificent spreadsheets, as I see them, what I've learnt is to make space in the spreadsheets. There has to be some flexibility within that. So I might have a week's word target, rather than a daily word target, so that I can play about a bit. Because some days you can't think of anything to say and you've got to go for that long walk to get the ideas to flow again. I need to know whether I'm on my critical path. There's a whole other critical path within the publishing house, but I need my own to ensure that I'm delivering everything I need to do. I'll also plan things like blog posts, and when I need to start talking about different things to my audience to let them know things that are going on.

***There's probably a whole blog out there where authors share their geeky spreadsheets with the world, because I'm sure that everyone who's got one is really proud of it. I love my spreadsheet. It's awesome, it does all the work I need to do.***

We have a question of the week from Richie

Janukowicz: how do you kill procrastination? I bet you don't suffer from this, do you, Katherine?

No. That's because I never forget that I'm gonna die one day. I semi-serious, but I do think that if you keep your end goal in mind, then it kills a lot (of procrastination). One of my procrastination tips is to have projects that you can switch between. If you don't fancy writing a chapter today, then maybe you can write a blog post? I quite a little bit of web

design on the side, so maybe you can spend some time tinkering with something visual instead, which is useful, but not the same mode.

***If nothing else, there is going for a walk. It does really help, because at least you're getting exercise then.***

Or read something. When people start worrying about their procrastination, they're worrying about one fixed thing and their brain is asking for a break and I think if you can find lots of different activities that you can give yourself a rest while doing something productive, then you're never procrastinating. Bring back momento mori. I think everyone should have a skull on their desk, I really do! I have a picture of Jean Rhys on my desk, who's my absolute heroine, and it's her in her late eighties, drunk. She was a very cantankerous, difficult woman, but she only had literary success at the end of her life, and she waited her whole life for that acclaim that she got. I think it helps to have those kind of people in mind as well.

***I'm really lucky that attention has come to me younger, and my challenge is not to squander it, as she would have valued it massively.***

# Episode 51 - The Impossible

## Choices of Samantha King

*Samantha King is a bestselling debut novelist and her book **The Choice** taps into parental fears. Sam has also worked in publishing and has a unique perspective on the process of writing, editing, publishing and promoting a bestseller...*

Your book **The Choice** has been called a mother's worst nightmare. Why is that?

It was certainly my worst nightmare: If you could only save one of your children, which child would you pick? How would you make that choice, and what would the repercussions be? I think in that respect it's probably every parent's worst nightmare. It was definitely mine and essentially that's the heart of it.

You have children. What do they think of the book?

I haven't told them all the detail of the story, but I have been plagued with 'So which one did you choose? And why did you choose that one? And what did she do?' It isn't based on them. The children in the story are twins, a boy and a girl, and they're ten. I've got a girl

who is age eleven and a boy who's eight, so it isn't based on them, but obviously I've drawn very heavily on my feelings as a mum, and yeah the kids are fascinated by it and they do grill me quite regularly. I haven't described them, they're not similar in terms of their physical characteristics or really even their personalities, but there are certain elements and definitely the kind of dilemmas the character Maddy weighs up in the story; is my affinity greater with my daughter? Is it greater with my son? What is the difference of a parent's relationship with a boy and a girl?

I have a boy and a girl so obviously there's a huge amount of material and emotion to draw on there. But they're not based on my children, and the male character in the story isn't based on my husband either, as as a neighbour actually feared and came to speak to me about. So, no one's based on anyone but I have drawn on a lot of my own family experiences.

That's that's the crux of a great story isn't it? You give your character an impossible choice. Was that always the intent?

The title of The Choice was actually my brilliant editor's suggestion. And in the first draft of the story that she read, it wasn't so heavily in the story, it was more about a mother feeling that she was becoming invisible in her life, and it was about what she has to do to come back to feel like she's really present in her family. But part of that was choosing between her children and then gradually, over the different drafts of the story, that really did become the shocking heart of it. One of the things that readers have said they've been surprised

about is that the choice does happen fairly or early on in the book, so it isn't a long build up 'Who's she going to choose?' The actual choice is really kind of incidental, and it's the springboard for what happens in the unraveling of a family and a relationship.

## Where did the idea of a choice come in the process?

I started writing the story when I was sitting at the kitchen table and my two children were arguing, and I looked at them both and I was gripped by the thought of, 'What if they don't know that I love them both so much? What if they just have no idea how much I care about them? And how would I ever choose between them?' So I did start writing with that idea, but what it triggered in me was that exploration of a mother who cares so much about her children that she almost becomes invisible. My original title was 'The Woman Who Vanished'. I wanted to write about that kind of relationship. It became the choice after the first draft where my editor read it and what leapt out at her was the the idea that a mother could choose.

***It was all in the story but it became crystallised with each successive draft.***

Then it became more about drilling down into 'But why this? And why that?' but essentially I started writing with that feeling of a mother's connection with her two children and the impossibility of saving one and not the other.

## How many drafts did you write in the end?

I don't keep count. Complete drafts, it's hard to say. I did about three where first half was more or less there, and then the second half I rewrote, and revised, and polished several times. I don't even know how to count, and then then I went back and I polished on scenes. A lot.

*There was a lot of rewriting, a lot of redrafting.*

## How different did your final draft of the finished book compare to your first draft?

I think the heart of it, the essence, and the tone is there. The actual plot changed considerably. The bad guys in the final version weren't the bad guys in the first version, so that changed and the motivations are slightly different, but I think the voice, the shape, and the heart of the story was there in the first draft.

You've worked in publishing as an editor and you've managed imprint can you tell us about your background?

I've been an editor for more than twenty years, and my background was very much in commercial fiction, so covering romance, suspense, thrillers. The whole range for a global fiction publisher, and I loved being an editor. The thing that I did that I loved the most was finding new new writers, new voices, and I set up an imprint called Red Dress Ink, which was part of the Harlequin publishing company, and that was all about discovering brand new voices, cutting edge stories. I was really inspired at the time by The Lovely Bones. This brave, audacious, raw voice, and I thought there are all these voices out there and I want to find them. I worked with lots and lots of authors. I then went freelance and worked for different publishers, different agents, and all this time I was kind of writing a little bit myself. But I never really took it very seriously. I think it was the book before The Choice that I finished and I thought I might try and get this published, and have a go and see. That didn't go anywhere, but I learned a huge amount, and I had to say the process is completely different on the other side of the desk.

Why did you want to do jump from one side to the other?

It wasn't deliberate. I never set out to have a career as an author. I just love writing, and I love storytelling, and I love characters. I just love to write. It's so different from editing, it is a completely different skill set. I don't think necessarily that you have to be successful as one to be as successful as the other. I just couldn't *not* do it. I just love to do it.

Were there any big shocks or surprises being an author for the first time?

I think the amount of work. As an editor, I would often say to an author, 'This strand of the book isn't quite working, maybe you could take it out?'

***I now realise that is is so much work, because you can't just remove it.***

You don't just take it out of a book, you've got to reimagine the whole story. Every character. It changes an entire book. That was a surprise, exactly how hard it is. Even knowing the market, knowing the importance of appealing to a market, none of that really helped me when it came to sitting down and looking at a blank page and thinking, 'What am I writing about?' It had to come very much from me, and not 'publishing' me.



## Did you write with a market in mind?

I should probably say that I did, but I didn't. To begin with, I wrote the story I really wanted to tell. Actual consciousness of the market has come in more with writing my second book, to be honest. The first time around I just wanted to write a good book that told the story that I wanted to tell, and was engaging. The revision process, and working with my editor, that did bring the market more into mind. Where does this fit? How would we publish it? I understand that's really, really important.

## Would you advise an author to think of the market first, or would you say to them write the book that you love?

It is a little bit of both. As an editor, it was it was very much a process of; I needed to fall in love with the book. You don't always fall in love with a book because it fits your list, or it has the right plot, or the right characters, it's very much that there's something about it that really engages you. If you try to pin that down too much, and say it *has* to have XYZ, the magic just goes I really feel that you can't say, 'Oh, this book is sold, therefore I'm going to write in that style.' It might not suit your style, it might not suit what's in you. The story you need to tell. That said, if you want to get published you do have to have an eye on the market. What kind of genre? Where would you fit in? It is a little bit of both, but I don't think

you can write to order, and I certainly don't think you can say, 'Gone Girl' was very successful, I'm going to write another 'Gone Girl.'

***It just has to be your story, and I think that's what will appeal to a publisher.***

What would you say to authors who have a string of rejections and are wondering should I go on?

I have had rejections and they are crushing. You feel like it's so personal, and it *is* personal because it's something that very much of you. For an editor, they're not rejecting you. They do have a slot on their list, they have to think what can we sell. If they like your writing — I'm speaking for myself but I think most editors would agree — if they see potential in your writing, they would encourage you, and you just never know when you're going to hit on that story that works.

***I wrote a family saga, I wrote a romantic comedy, they just weren't right.***

When I started writing *The Choice* it tapped into something in me that brought out the best in my writing. Every rejection, you've got to pick yourself up, you learn from it. It isn't personal.

You dabbled in different genres before you settled on this one, so was that a question of you kind of finding your voice?

Very much so. I always start with the story, and the characters. I told the stories I wanted to tell and explore the themes.

***But also as you grow up, what interests you in life, and your own life experience, changes you.***

Being a mum and a parent had a massive impact, and training as a counsellor and in psychology, became more fascinating to me, and that really has filtered into my writing.

Has studying psychology helped your writing?

I think it is probably the single most important thing that I did. When I left working in-house for a publisher, I left to retrain full time as a counsellor. I qualified as a counselling psychotherapist. I actually worked with young people, that was my sort of speciality as it were. But just the training itself in terms of self-development, that questioning of everything, that peeling back the layers, and examining myself really as much as learning to understand other people's psychology...

*It's about looking deep into people's hearts and minds, to sort of coin a cliché. That's what counselling training taught me and it's incredibly useful for writing as well.*

Do you use it in the development of your characters?

I do. One of the things my editor always has to remind me of is, 'What do they look like outside?' I start my characterisation very much from the inside. What motivates them? What do they care about? What are these people all about?

*I go from the inside out, and keep questioning, and keep layering.*

That's what fascinates me about people. What makes them tick? And what fascinates me in writing. There's no one good character, one bad character. People are very complex, and it's exploring that. Put a good person in a difficult situation, what happens to them? And it's all those kind of stories about people's lives that I find really compelling myself.

You're writing under a pseudonym. Why did you do that?

I didn't set out to be an author, as such. I didn't say, I want to be famous. I want to write books. When I first wrote, it was with great trepidation, and I when I was offered a

publishing deal I was really excited but I thought, I'm not sure I want to tell people about this.

***That's the fear of failure, I suppose. I almost thought I would go under the radar. I was very naive. I thought I would just pretend it's not me, and no one will know.***

None of my friends. And then of course I realized that's stupid. To be successful, which I did want, you had to tell people about your book. It's almost like this glass door; when you're being published you walk through this door, and there's no turning back. You cannot just act like this hasn't happened, and bury your head in the sand. That was a really, really big turning point for me, when I realized that. I did want my book to be read, I wanted readers to love it, and to achieve that I had to start talking about it. The pseudonym was intended to be a little of a privacy screen, but that's kind of gone.

## Did you set yourself any goals?

I wanted to write the best book I could write. I felt a lot of responsibility to the characters, to have that sort of integrity to their story. I really wanted it to be the absolute best, and that came in with all the rewrites.

***Until my editors said, that's it we're done, it's good to go, I would said I will rewrite it as many times as you need me to for it to be the best book that it can be.***

I didn't really measure anything in terms of sales. That was then. Now the book's out there it's different. You get the bargain. It's kind of like wanting to be an A-student. I want my

book to be the best. I want people to love it. I don't want to fail. I want people to buy it, so I think the goalposts actually do change the further on through the process you go.

## What are your ambitions for your second book?

To finish it. With the second book you do have a little bit more commercial awareness. I've read all the reviews for my first book. They do get in your head. It's the worst thing you can do in a way. I still believe you have to get back to the heart of the story you want to tell, and almost ignore what people are saying, and just work with your editor. I'm still working on my second book with my editor, and I've finished a couple of drafts, I'm going back through the process, working on it and rewriting. Again, I just want to make it the best book I can.

## How was it reading reviews?

Terrifying. And I have to say that's where again my editor was so brilliant, because where there were things that weren't necessarily clear in motivations, we really worked to make it watertight before it went out. Because she knew that once it's out there, it's like throwing something to the vultures.

***It does feel like you're throwing your child to the vultures, and they're going to shred it.***

It's really hard. The first few reviews; fantastic. I would say to my husband it's like getting my school report and A-level results every single day of my life. Someone standing over me saying, 'You could do that better, that wasn't great, I wouldn't have done that...' It's hideous. When you get A grades, fantastic, it's lovely. When you get bad reviews it's demoralising and they hurt.

You only remember the bad ones. I can get twenty five-star reviews, and I do take them on-board... there was one lady who put a review on Amazon, and I did reply to her personally. I do know (you) don't reply to reviews, don't argue, don't even thank. You have to rise above it. But I did reply to her to say, 'I feel like you've seen inside my head, because she totally got the book.' But there are people who write stinky reviews, and they wound. They really do, and equally I have to try to ride above those, too.

**You have great social media. Were you new to that, or was it something you did already?**

I was on Facebook, but very rarely used it. I had been on Twitter sporadically before I dipped into it. I set up my Samantha King page the day the publishers said they were going to send out the press release, that the deal had been done as it were. And I suddenly realized I needed a platform to announce it, and to engage with readers, and where people could get to know me.

***Social media did not exist when I worked in publishing. Word of mouth literally meant go and talk to people.***

Now word of mouth means click LIKE and SHARE. It's a whole new world and it's good and it's bad.

## Were you given any social media training?

The only thing I was ever told by my editor and publicist was to be myself, and I'm sure people do have media training, but for me I just I genuinely just try to be who I am. Engaged with people here and there. I realise I'm trying to sell my book, so it feels a little bit awkward when you crowbar that in, 'By the way, my book is 99p on Kindle!' And I do feel I'm saying it a lot.

## Did you get any media training for your publicity duties?

I haven't had media training. I suppose having been an editor for a long time I was used to doing some public speaking, talking at conferences, and that sort of thing. The hardest thing I find now is that it's all about yourself. Previously, I was talking about other people's books, doing publicity for your own work is much harder. To be honest, it has been quite difficult. My first experience of writing something and seeing it appear in a national newspaper was pretty terrifying. Because it's all about you, and it's not just about your book. It's going public and people judging you. If you're a very confident, social person, and you're out there, then you'll probably love the publicity side of it. It's the thing that I



enjoy the least but it is very necessary. I try to approach it by being myself and doing what what the publisher asks me to do.

I do want to sell my book, and I will talk to whoever is interested to hear. Possibly that that changes with time, but at this point I think it is just doing whatever the publicist and publisher ask me to do. I trust them.

## Any tips for as both author and editor as we work on our post-edit draft?

I actually love that, when you're going through and you're tightening. For me, personally, I think leave it a little bit if you can. I always read it on my Kindle app, once I've finished a Word document I then read it try to read it as a reader, and just let go of all that kind of editing process.

***I read it as a reader and I see what's feeling clunky, what doesn't feel like it's moving fast enough. And then just ruthlessly tighten. Anything that doesn't seem to be impactful or necessary, just cut it.***

One of the things I did when I left publishing in-house, and worked freelance, was I copy edited. That was an invaluable process because you're working really close to the text and you pick up on an author's style and the phrasing that they repeat a lot. I'm very aware of my own repeated phrasing, and for a reader it can start to grate, so you have to kind of be aware of your own foibles. But that said, it *is* your voice, and on *The Choice*, when it came to the proofread and the proofreaders raised certain points of style, I got the message from

the editor that **the author's voice has to carry the day. So, if you write in a certain way, and that's your style, then *that's* your style.** You don't want to edit out your style, but at the same time if things are repeating, they lose their impact a little bit.

**Don't over-egg it. It has more impact if it's clean and tight.**

I've cut sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters that I loved, that I thought were remarkably well written, and you know the reader doesn't need to read it.

**They're interested in in the emotional impact, the story, the characters. Less is more.**

The Choice is available on audiobook. What was that experience like?

It was absolutely brilliant, and before they made the audiobook I got a chance, very luckily, to choose which voice I felt suited the story. I picked the one that I liked the most, and I think she's an absolutely fantastic job. Hearing my own words come back to me? Very, very strange but powerful and I felt really proud hearing it, actually. I love audiobooks.

Where did the idea for book two come from? And is it something that's changed because of your experiences with the first book?

The prologue of the second book is in the back of the paperback of *The Choice*. It's another story that came very much from an emotional scenario that grabbed me. A dilemma, a parental predicament, with a lot of suspense and unraveling. I think that's very much what I write about. Extraordinary situations that characters might find themselves in, and how they deal with it, and how it turns everything in their life upside down and the choices that people have to make. It's another emotional story, very hard-hitting, I hope.

When you're dealing with stuff like this it must take a toll during the day, or can you go in and out of character?

It does actually, that's a very good point. I think when you write things, when you're plumbing the depths of your emotion, and you are imagining scenarios that are very real... That's the other thing I try to write about; the stories I've written are things that really could happen every day to people, and in some cases have. It is draining. I work. I drop the kids at school, I come home, I write solidly all day, and then I go pick the kids up again. It's full on, I don't break, I write very intensively, and by the end of it it is draining. Yeah.

Where do you see yourself in five years' time? Are you still writing as Samantha King? Still writing these kind of big emotional thrillers with difficult dilemmas?

I'm sure I will evolve in what I write. I think as you change as a person, your writing inevitably changes. The experiences you go through. I really enjoy what I'm writing at the moment. I've got lots more ideas for the future, so hopefully I will still be writing and still be published, and we'll see where the stories grow and change.

# Episode 54

## The Mighty Joanna Penn

*Only two weeks to go till the publication of our book **Back To Reality**, and we seek the advice of the amazing Joanna Penn, NY Times bestselling author, public speaker and podcaster...*

How did you get started as a writer?

I was pretty miserable in my day job. I used to implement accounts payable into large corporates. Pretty boring job. I was living the cubicle dream, but it was a six-figure dream. They paid me well. Many people recognise this sort of golden handcuffs situation, and it was good money, I travelled a lot. It was it was all the things we're meant to want when we hit thirty. You're like yay, I'm responsible human being, but miserable and I got to the point where I actually was crying at work. And this was a big deal, I mean that's just crazy. It was the existential pain that we get in the modern first world. I started reading Tony Robbins and the self-help gurus, which is not very British, really, but I was determined to change my life. At that point, I was living in Australia so I decided that I would write myself a self-help book, because that might help me, and change the world for other people, because that's what we all think with our first book. So, I wrote that first book, which I rewrote and republished as Career Change later on. I self-published that in 2008, before the Kindle,

before self publishing was trendy, before it was acceptable in any in any way. And the experience of self publishing in 2008 led me to start The Creative Penn.

In 2009 I started my podcast and did NaNoWriMo. You guys know, you're British; we have quite a culture of snobbery around literature in Britain. And I think because I was living in Australia and mainly connecting with the American market I was able to shortcut that snobbery. That was really helpful to me because I went to Oxford, my mum was a literature teacher, so I have this huge deal about any novel I wrote had to win a Man Booker prize or a Pulitzer Prize. It had to be a literary, award-winning novel because that's the only worthwhile thing to write. So I was crippled with this. I think that was a kind of block for me, like a self-doubt block. The other person who changed my life was Dan Brown because I realized that you could write a religious thriller and makes loads of money with it. I have a degree in theology, so that's when I started writing fiction in 2009.

Did you start in nonfiction, or fiction? Because you do both, don't you?

Yes, I started with nonfiction with that book on career change. It's funny, because people say, 'What would you do if you have to give one up?' I couldn't give either up. I love both of them. I write under two different names. I write fiction as J.F. Penn and nonfiction as Joanna Penn. If you Google The Creative Penn with one 'n' it will say 'Did you mean The Creative Penn with two 'n's?' That's the power of content marketing.

***Whether you write fiction or nonfiction, content marketing is still huge and Google is still huge.***

I now put content on my fiction site, as well, around the themes and the things that are in my books, like religious relics and graveyards, exciting books that I've read, content like that. And whatever your name is you can own that, too. The problem with your name, Mark Desvaux, is that that is hard to spell. I found that spelling J.F. Penn. I have to say 'F for Frances' because it might sound like 'S'. I should have not used F. I should have used something like 'JT' which would have been easier to say out loud. If I was doing it again, I would not use initials. I would have gone with a gender-neutral name. I went with initials, obviously JK Rowling has got away with it very well. Like many in fantasy she used gender neutral initials. I write my action adventure series in a very male-dominated niche, people like Clive Cussler and James Patterson, and so I didn't want to use my my female name. One of my first reviews on my thrillers was, 'I can't believe a woman wrote this,' and I was like, 'Okay then.' I'm a feminist, I believe women should be equal in everything, but I didn't want people to question my gender, and I know you guys thought about doing a female name as well, so it's interesting what you consider.

***My main tip would be; be able to say and spell it out loud.***

You mentioned content marketing. Is that Facebook?  
Twitter?

I don't put social media under content marketing. Two reasons; you don't own it, and it's ephemeral. It's gone very very quickly. I think the half-life of a tweet is something like five minutes. It really does disappear very fast, and a Facebook post... I mean, how many of

us scroll more than three or four times before like, yeah, okay that's enough already? Instagram, the same.

***Content marketing to me is primarily word-based content. The Google algorithm updates regularly, so if you update things regularly, if you put out a blog post every week, or a podcast every Monday, then they will start recognising that.***

For my podcast I include a transcript every week for the people who like to read, but also for the Google SEO, or search engine optimisation. I do think that with the voice-to-text AI stuff that's happening very soon they'll be able to do the same with audio. But, as you guys know, if someone wants to find a comment that you made in the middle of a podcast, if you don't have a transcript how are people going to find out unless they listen to the whole thing? The Creative Penn comes up whenever you search for author-related things. That's because I've been posting three to five times a week since 2008. There are fifteen hundred articles on The Creative Penn that lead to that, as well as articles on other sites around the Internet. For nonfiction authors, for becoming an authority in your niche, then I think content marketing is still incredibly valuable, and it lasts. People will still find things later.

Many fiction authors listening will go, 'Oh but a blog tour is completely pointless,' and I agree to a point. What you have to do is look for websites that actually have decent traffic that are in your target niche. Let's assume you have some virtual reality technology in the book; you might consider doing a blog post for a virtual reality website. Someone who's really into virtual reality tech that ties into your book, and that will be much more powerful than doing a book review blog tour on book review sites, which are not highly trafficked.

For blog tours, aim to be on websites that have decent traffic, and if you're writing fiction which most of the audience are, go for this sort of tangential approach of websites that



overlap. For example I've been on podcasts and blogs about Jungian psychology, because I use aspects of that. I just did one on a death podcast about end of life and grief because I have a lot of death in my books. Think about the themes that are in your book, or the places, or the technology, or dragons.

We did have a question from one of our listeners  
Laura Edwards: What do you do if you only have one book to promote? Should I wait and promote it when I have a few books out? Or should I bring out the big guns for the first book?

There are two answers. Can you wait? And what is your personality like? When I wrote my first novel I was like, 'I'm not waiting. I'm going to do everything I can to make this book sell loads of copies, I'm not going to wait.' There is established wisdom in the indie community that you should write three books in a series before you promote it, and that's all well and good if you're going to write three books quite quickly, but if you're a bit slower then maybe just go for it.

And what do you want to achieve? If you if you want to hit the Amazon bestseller lists, like you guys do, you want to get the little orange thing. That is your definition of success, which is fantastic by the way, it's much better than saying, 'I want to sell loads of books.' I have no doubt you'll get it because it's not that big a deal, to be fair!

Change your category. Look at the category you are in, how many books, or what ranking does the book in your subcategory have, and if all the books in that category are in the top one hundred then you're screwed, so don't even bother. Look for the smaller categories, and then you decide the day you're going to do your spike.

***I don't believe that your spike should be launch day.***

For example, I hit the New York Times two years after the book came out, and I hit the USA Today list five years after the book came out. You can do relauches whenever you like.

***So, for Laura I would say decide what your definition of success is, decide what day you want to do that, and then look at how much money you have to spend.***

That's basically all you can do with one book. What do you want for the rest of your author life? Are you going to write more books under this author name? Are you writing more books in the series? Are you using that book to build an email list? Do you just need some reviews? So you need to look wider than just that orange flag.

For me, the goal was to leave my job, to replace my income, so I was never that bothered about spike sales. By the time I left my job in September 2011 I had six books, I think, but I was also doing other things, speaking and stuff like that, so you have to consider what your goal is and whether that's an immediate goal, like the orange banner, or whether it's a longer term goal, like I want to make a thousand pounds a month for the rest of my life, or I want to leave my job. Then you can start designing your marketing plan.

## If you can't make your book a bestseller, what's a healthy ranking?

The rank moves every hour, so it's not something that you can ever say much about. And it depends what country you're aiming for. For example, eighty percent of my income is U.S. dollars, so I have always aimed to sell mainly in America. Canada's only got about twenty five million people, Australia is twenty million, Britain sixty-eight million, America *three hundred and eighty million*. I was always aiming for America, so most indie marketing is on Amazon.com. Things like Amazon ads, which Mark Dawson might have talked about, is on Amazon.com. Ad-stacking with Bookbub helped me hit the USA Today list last year. If you want to hit the top one hundred in the U.S., it depends on when you do it. Now (September) is a great time, August is a great time to try and hit big lists because all the publishers are on holiday. That's what I did. (Rank and chart) numbers are very hard, but because of the tiny little sub niches, especially in the U.K., you can probably get an orange flag for under a thousand copies.

## Do you think it's important to focus your advertising effort in one particular country?

You have to decide what's important for you. You've been very U.K. focused, so I would think you would be aiming for the U.K. So you might spend more money on Facebook ads in the U.K., for example. If you put your book on KDP you are launching worldwide, and I absolutely think that people should always launch worldwide. Another thing with content

marketing or social media or e-mail list is your audience is global. And this is one of the things that annoys me about traditional publishing. I know they're very territorial, but it's crazy in the world we're living in. Often they will license world English rights from an author, and then they will not publish that book across the world because of the licensing agreement in these areas. My advice to authors who want a traditional publishing deal is to only license your rights within the territories where the publisher is going to publish you, and self publish in those other countries. There's a lot of U.K. authors who no one's ever heard of in America because their books either aren't available or even if they got a US publisher they didn't do anything. If it's a deal you want, then go for it, but many authors don't even think about this. They just sign whatever they are given.

***The other thing authors have to understand about contracts is the contract you are given is just to be negotiated.***

Sure, the publisher can have world English rights, but in two years' time or three years' time if they have not exploited the rights in a specific country, then those rights revert to me. Because the technologies are expanding every day right now. PublishDrive for example, I've just started putting my books on there. They're doing huge things in Asia, China, it's just incredible. Google launched a micro-payment app in India, which means the Indian market is going to open up. VR we mentioned. Off world rights is becoming a thing! Make sure the contracts you sign enable you to take advantage of things over time. J.K. Rowling is the most famous one. Pottermore is her basically self publishing her Harry Potter eBooks.

I'm a total futurist, so I'm always talking about this stuff. Audiobooks are huge, expanding market. Many publishers take all the rights and then don't exploit them. And now you can do it yourself on [ACX](#).

***Don't give away rights without making sure you can get them back if they're not exploited.***

I believe Virtual Reality is the next Internet. All three of us, instead of doing this on Skype, I believe we would do this in VR and we would have an audience who are, in quotation marks, live. For book launches, coming back to marketing, I would launch my next book in the catacombs under Paris in VR and people would come and join me. I see it more of an experiential thing. For example, I love scuba diving but you know I'm not going to go do something super dangerous, but I would love to do more scuba diving in VR. I do all my shopping on my phone, and I'd love to be doing that in VR. So I think it's a much bigger change that's coming.

You've recently relaunched one of your new nonfiction books. When when you go into the process of launching a book, do you have a tried and tested method?

It's very different for your first book, in a new niche and a new name, compared to someone who has an audience. Circling back to the indie side of things, my business

model is not based on spike launches. With traditional publishing, every month there's a whole load of new authors coming along the conveyor belt, and bookstores mainly stock books for four to six weeks, or even less, and then they go back to the publisher. Physical book retail only has a certain amount of space, so your book comes out, it's in the book store, the publisher does spike marketing, you sell some books, and then it's time for the next author.

***Whereas the indie business model is far more about sustaining those sales over time, and using the backlist to create a steady income.***

The income model is more like a salary, because it's more steady, every month. Whereas the traditional publishing income model for an author is three spikes: on signing, on manuscript, on launch. You might get four payments over two years, whereas an indie will get paid every month. So this is why the launch thing is quite different. When I'm launching either fiction or nonfiction, I will have been talking about it for quite a long time. I will be using Instagram and Pinterest for my fiction, and sharing pictures along the way. I have Facebook pages, I use Twitter, and I just share everything. If I go and do a research trip... I was in Italy a few weeks ago and I shared a picture of this really cool skeleton saint that I found in a church. Stuff that my fiction audience likes, and then I'll say I'm doing research for this book and if we don't have a title I just call it whatever the working title is.

***Take a lot of pictures. I would recommend everyone take pictures all the time, because you can use them in the build-up to launch, but you can also use them after launch.***

I resurrect pictures regularly on my social media. Here's me in the Sagrada Familia in Spain, which I used in *Gates of Hell*. That's the build up. That's very soft, attraction-based marketing. And then I have an e-mail list. I know you've talked about this, but everyone should have an e-mail list. And this is much harder for traditionally published authors, because a publisher just doesn't even bother, or is building their own email list. I give away free books on both my sites, and have built up a list of people there.

I set up longer preorders for nonfiction, because a lot of people buy that in print. As an indie you can do print preorders with [Ingramspark](#). And then I use [Createspace](#) as well. And if you're doing an audiobook, which with nonfiction is very lucrative, then you need a bit of a longer lead time. With fiction I do long preorders on Kobo and iBooks, because you can get some good promotions there, but with Amazon I just do it a week before, and then I send an email to my list, announce it on the podcast. I do some Facebook ads, Bookbub ads, Amazon ads. and they get some reviews.

***The main thing is that the spike on launch is my audience. It is the people who already know who I am and for many authors that's not very many people.***

Everyone has to realise that if you go up the charts you don't stay there. It goes up and then it will come down. Sit on the rankings about four to eight hours after you're expecting people to buy. If I have a Bookbub, I get up about five am the following day in Britain, and there's my spike, so I see myself in the rankings in the top one hundred, or the top couple hundred on Amazon. And that's where you take your screen prints. It's so very important to take screen prints!

## Is there not a piece of software that does that?

No\*. You have [Amazon Author Central](#) and there is a graph of your sales rank, but there isn't the orange banner. So if you want that orange banner you have to take a screen print when it happens. Also, check your author rank. You can get some good screen prints there. I've got pictures of me above Stephen King, above Lee Child. You're only there for an hour. Take screen prints of your book next to other books. These are all ego things that actually do not matter to anyone but you. But it's social proof, which I think is quite useful.

*\*Ed's note - there is a site called [NovelRank](#), which tracks the main Kindle charts, not the genres.*

## What advice do you have for authors who don't like the social bragging?

It's going to depend what you want to achieve. The reason I send a bio with 'New York Times and USA Today bestseller' is I don't want to tell you that. I want the host to read it. Because if I say it, it sounds like bragging, but I want people to know that and I put it on the front of my books, like many people do, because that's a big deal.

Winding back to what I said about when I started; in 2008 I had two thousand books in my house and I suddenly realized that I didn't know how to sell them. Thus began my journey of learning marketing! I'm an introvert, I'm an author, you know, like many people listening I don't really like public things. I've been on T.V., I've been on radio, I haven't really enjoyed



it very much. I don't like doing a lot of events, so you pick the things that work for your personality, and for me that has been content marketing podcasting. Attracting people by being useful, or by being entertaining with my fiction.

***Marketing is sharing what you love and then you will attract people who love the same thing.***

You don't have to go around going, 'Yeah, I'm amazing, buy my book!' Like I said, write an article about amazing graveyards in Italy and you'll attract people who are interested in that type of thing.

You talked about 'Don't do your spike on the day of launch...'

I know you guys are aware that you need reviews, you know social proof is good, it helps the algorithm. I think about it as like a little check mark that Amazon goes, oh yeah there's another check mark, it must be a good book. But for the really big money-making platforms like Bookbub, you need to have at least twenty-five reviews to do something like that, and most of these email lists will not allow a new book. That's why I was able to hit the USA Today last year with books that I published in 2011, because I had loads of reviews on those books. I got accepted for a Bookbub and then I put a ton of other ads on it, and was able to do the spike five years after launch. You will really only be able to sell to people who already know who you are on launch day.

***When you're an indie, selling primarily Kindle books, the main thing that moves the needle is email lists. And if you don't have a big email list, you're not going to be able to do too much yourself, so then it's about the paid email list and they won't accept you unless you have reviews.***

Think about your launch period as a month, for example, and then also schedule in something for the quiet times. August being a good one, or March was when we hit the New York Times.

***So getting those reviews will help you at the beginning and then you'll be able to get those bigger email lists later on.***

This is probably my biggest tip for marketing; you have to decide what you want. So, if you decide to hit the USA Today list, there *is* a way to do it, and there is a way to sell thousands of books. Publishers do this all the time, but you need to have a plan, you need to have a budget, you need email lists, whether they're your own or with other authors. You need to have that definition of success in place, and then go for it.

It's really important to remember that I started writing in 2006, so I've been doing this eleven years now. I left my job in 2011. Those spike moments mean a lot, but they don't mean as much as the fact that I make a really good living as a writer, which is mainly to do with my monthly income based on twenty five books. A backlist of twenty five books, my podcast, all my writing together. That's what I care about. It's the ongoing thing. I don't chase media like T.V., I don't chase being in a physical store in the U.K. That might help my ego, but it doesn't matter as much as making really good money.

## You write nonfiction and fiction. How do you alternate between the two?

I've just finished the second draft of *Map of Shadows*, which is a fantasy novel. That's with my editor and it might come out at Christmas, it might come out next year. It's the first in a new series. I did that with mainly with dictation, so that's another little productivity tip.

Now I'm actually working on a book called *The Healthy Writer*, which I'm co-writing with a medical doctor and that will be out in January 2018, and it's basically because authors are really, really in a lot of pain. A lot of medical problems and mental health problems, and that goes along side my *Successful Author Mindset* books. I basically alternate between fiction and nonfiction as a kind of palate cleanser.

***Nonfiction is much easier to write and it sells more in a sustained manner. Whereas fiction is much more exciting, much more fun, and is more like a lottery ticket. It might do really well and it might not.***

Most of my revenue is from fiction, but one novel on its own wouldn't make a dent. I have a nine book arcane series, I have a trilogy. And what's exciting about fiction as opposed to nonfiction is the intellectual property asset point of view, because a story doesn't age.

I just rewrote *How to market a book*, the third edition, because over four years things have changed. My first novel, *Stone of Fire*, hit the list last year, still sells. I'm working with a screenwriter at the moment, pitching a series based on my trilogy of crime novels. Fiction has much more application in multiple ways of asset usage, whereas nonfiction is just less exciting, but can be a perennial seller. Christmas nonfiction sales in print are

awesome. So we all look forward to January. August is terrible, so everyone's looking forward to the Christmas boom.

## How do you keep all these plates spinning?

I guess we have to circle back to what we started with, which was I was so unhappy in my job. I wanted to change my life, and eleven years on this is the life I've always wanted. I absolutely love being an author, and I make more money than I ever made before. I am a workaholic, but I love it. I have no work-life balance, all my travel is about writing, everything I do is because I love, love, love this lifestyle. When I wrote down what I wanted: I wanted to read, write and travel, and that's what I do. I do this all of this because I love it, and I wouldn't want to do anything else.

## You wrote down your goals?

Yeah, absolutely. I wrote down: I want to be a six figure author entrepreneur, and I want to leave my job, and I did that in 2011. My husband left his job in 2015 to join the company. Onwards and upwards. I am very ambitious, and I think that's fine. I know you've had very successful authors on the podcast, and ambition is something that British people particularly have a problem with, but Americans don't. The American indie author community is chock full of seven figure Indies, and that is a lot of fun. So you can create and make money in this in this way and that to me is very exciting.

Your husband's joined the company. Do you have assistants? A team around you?

We have a publishing company. Curl Up Press is my imprint. I was actually at the Independent Publishers' Guild this week. We have a limited company in the U.K. and I have a team of about twelve freelancers: professional editors, designers, website people, marketing. At the beginning, I did it all myself for about seven years, and then when I started earning enough money that I could hire other people I started doing that. And that's inevitable because you can't do it all yourself. But there is only me and my husband as employees of the company as directors. He's in charge of investment.

I know I've talked about money and I think it's important, because this is not a sustainable life unless you do make money, but I measure my life by what I create, and that to me is the difference between my life as a corporate slave and now. It's hard at the beginning with one book, you guys have other careers, but there have been very few times in history when it's been possible to do so well as an author and a creator.

***It really is the most exciting time for empowered authors.***

What's next for you?

Like many authors, I have so many ideas that I want to write. *Map of Shadows* is my first true fantasy, the first of a trilogy, so next year I'll definitely finish the trilogy. I've also got more action adventure set in New Orleans that I started earlier this year that I need to

finish, and *The Healthy Writer*. One thing I'm really obsessed with for writers is self-censorship. I mentioned Carl Jung earlier, and the idea of the shadow. I only stopped censoring my writing at book five, when I write a book called *Desecration*, which is a very dark book. If you like Stephen King, you'll like it, if you want cozy, don't bother. I actually started to write what was really in my head without self censoring. I want to write a nonfiction book about the shadow, and how we can use the shadow in our writing to bring depth to our creation. This will probably take a couple of years, because it's a very deep book, and I want to read a lot and really go deep into that topic. I'm very excited about that, because I think this is a missing book in the canon for writers, because so often we back off from it. I'm basically constantly writing, so happy times.

## When you talk about self-censorship, can you give us an example?

I've always I mentioned death before, I've always thought about death. I go to graveyards for fun. As a romantic trip I took my husband to the mass grave in Budapest for a novel about far right militant stuff over there. I'm a crime writer as well, so there's a certain type of dark writer in the community, and I've talked to horror writers, and I also read that type of book. When we talk about sex, death, different forms of relationships, even if someone listening might have a real problem with their mum, and then wants to write a memoir about it, but they don't know how they could do that... that's quite common. People with their parents, or people with their children... look at what happened with Lionel Shriver and *We Need To Talk About Kevin*. She courts difficult things. The things we're obsessed with we try and hide from people. I didn't tell people that I liked graveyards for a long, long time

because I thought that made me weird, and now I find it's very common. Two in five people like graveyards and think about death.

Write what you are fascinated in. I am fascinated with my own shadow, with the darker side of me, what comes out after three tequilas. you know? Sometimes we write something... I don't even know where that came from. I'm not religious but I'm spiritual, so I'm very interested in that supernatural side of things, and I want to go deep into life and write about the things that interest me and that I'm excited about, and other people will find that interesting. That's what we have to be really sure of, and be confident of. There are people out there on the internet who are like us, and they are the ones who want our books and that's again why coming back to indie publishing and internet publishing and global publishing... I've sold books in eighty-four countries in the world and those people in those countries are more like me than the people down the road from me who shop at the local independent bookstore. I'm connecting more with someone in India than I am with someone down the road, because of the Internet and that's probably more likely.

***Let's all just go deeper in and bring that depth into our books.***

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Jo Ho recommended the S.K. Quinn indie author books:

Indie Author Survival Guide

For Love Or Money

Kate Harrison mentioned using Making A Killing On Kindle, by Michael Alvear (Third edition, 2014)

Julie Cohen recommended The Wisdom Of The Enneagram for character work.

10 Step Self Publishing Boot Camp, by SK Quinn

For Love Or Money by SK Quinn

SK Quinn recommended The Storytelling Animal



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Amazon authors pages are at [Amazon Author Central](#)

[Mark Dawson's Self Publishing Formula](#)

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Liz Fenwick recommended [Cornerstones Literary Consultancy](#) and [Julie Cohen's services for writers](#)

[The Romantic Novelists' Association, UK](#)

[Robert McKee's Story Course](#)

[Wordpress](#) is the blog service we use

And we use [Mailchimp](#) for our mailing list

Jo Ho recommended [Grammarly](#) and [Pro Writing Aid](#) as online editorial services.

Jo also recommended [Instafreebie](#) for building your mailing list.

Jo got started in the UK film industry by looking for jobs on [mandy.com](#)

There are tons of resources and opportunities for screenwriters, including free scripts, at [the BBC Writers' Room](#).

Jo Ho also recommended the [For Love Or Money](#) and [AAYAA All Things Fantasy & Promos](#) Facebook groups.

[Bookouture](#) is a publisher for indie authors.

[Netgalley](#) is great for getting reviews.

With John Yorke we discussed the idea of [the Five Man Band to develop character ensembles](#).

SK Quinn recommended the [Bookbub](#) and [Book Barbarian](#) newsletters.

You can advertise using [Amazon Marketing Services](#).

Karen Ball spoke about [Unbound Publishing's](#) crowdfunding model.

We discussed our love of [The Phoenix Comic](#) with Karen Ball.

Karen Ball's [Bookbound Writers' Retreat](#)

Katherine May mentioned [the creative writing courses at Canterbury University](#)

Joanna Penn has tons of advice over at [The Creative Penn](#)

For international ebook sales, Joanna Penn suggested [PublishDrive](#)

For printed books Joanna recommended [Ingramspark](#) and [Createspace](#)

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